



平坂読

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(illustrator トニギ)

僕は友達が少ない

9



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平坂読

Yuki Miyazaki

イラスト：アキラ

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遊佐葵

日高日向

大友朱音

神宮司火輪

温泉にて生徒会ver



Boku wa Tomodachi ga Sukunai

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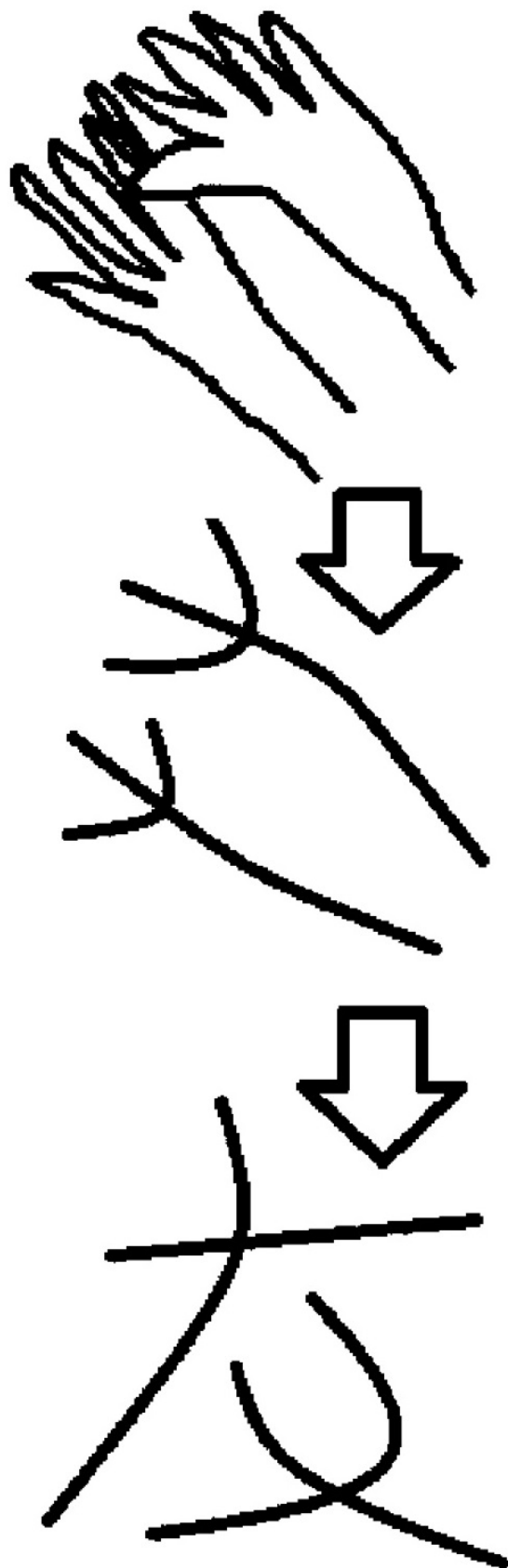
Chapter 1: The Time When I Held Your Hand

I remember having learned the kanji for ‘friend’ during Japanese class back when I was in elementary school.

‘Place both hands together and then use them to help each other out.’

This seemed to represent my current situation.

Done in a way similar to this diagram.



I had made friends with myself.

Beginning in December, the days after school were often sunny.

I, Hasegawa Kodaka, had been called out to the rooftop by my kouhai[1], who was in the same club as me, Shiguma Rika, and then we had had a fight.

It had been a physical fight, but it was completely one-sided and I was totally beaten up.

Even though it had almost seemed like completely one-sided bullying, I think it was still a proper fight.

That Shiguma Rika, who up until recently had been quietly supporting the crazy antics of the Neighbors Club from the shadows, had let her true emotions break through her shell for the first time and beat the crap out of me.

I had also released all the emotions that I was holding in my chest for the first time and screamed my true feelings at someone else.

Both of us had believed our own ideals were the correct ones and tried to prove the other's wrong, and in the end we both ended up having a fight.

Summoning all the courage I had, I had confessed to Rika whether she would be my friend or not, which caused her to burst into laughter.

‘Huh? What do you mean?’

She said, and continued:

‘Rika means, aren't we all already friends?’

She had said those words and accepted my confession.

‘Rika, can you help me?’

‘Sure thing.’

Rika had answered my request for help with an easy-going voice that showed no signs of anger.

Rika, with her back leaning against the rooftop's fence, had slowly stood up.

And then she came over and offered her hand to me as I was lying flat on my back.

I took the entire length of her hand and stood up while my face grimaced in pain.

Just how the kanji for ‘friend’ looked like.

Neither one of us were going to ignore the other, so we both had held out and gripped each other's hand.

At that time, we had made up our minds to continue forward.

Shiguma Rika and I had perhaps become true friends.

Chapter 2: Hasegawa Kodaka's Life Counseling

As soon as I stood up, Rika immediately said:

“Sorry, but Rika needs to rest for just a little bit more”, and sat down leaning against the fence.

I was also tired from standing up in that state, so I sat down next to Rika and hence both of us sat side by side.

“So, this is our first time meeting like this, huh?”

Rika said in a peculiar voice.

“What’s up with that appropriate naming[1]?”

“Well then, how about the ‘Meeting of the Wise Men’? Or the ‘Human Instrumentality Project[2]’?”

I was back to being the tsukkomi[3], and Rika was proposing all sorts of strange and delightful new names again.

“You really like using exaggerated and cool sounding names, don’t you? Like ones from manga and anime.”

“...Mhm.”

Rika looked embarrassed and started to blush.

“Like your room being called ‘Sigma Sect’.”

“How come you didn’t tell Rika beforehand, when you were going to go through that place!”

“Or ‘Nine Lives Breaker’.”

“Uuuh... You’re making Rika sound very childish.”

Saying that as she was sulking, Rika did look very cute.

“Rather than childish, isn’t it more like eighth-grade syndrome[4]?”

“Wha——”

Rika’s eyes were opened wide upon hearing those embarrassing words.

“Unexpectedly you and Kobato would get along well, huh?”

“C-Certainly Rika loves the ‘Iron Necromancer’ series and Rika does believe that Rika would like to have hot conversations with Kobato-san, but...”

At that point she averted her eyes, looking as if she was going to be punished.

“...Rika means, since that tension from earlier, you’re saying meaner things now, aren’t you?”

“I got beaten up pretty bad by you earlier. At least let me return the favor.”

My words getting sharper and me picking on Rika made me laugh.

“...But Kodaka-senpai, you said some awfully suspicious words earlier, didn’t you?”

“Eh!”

When Rika said that, my face twitched a little.

Seeing me remember some of our arguments from the fight earlier, and breaking out in a cold sweat, Rika let a small chuckle slip through:

“Haha...”

I went with the flow and also let out a strained laugh.

Even though my emotions were laid bare during the fight before, as you can see, as soon as it had been over they returned to their usual, painfully embarrassing state.

I mean, after all, if I saw someone I didn’t know having a fight on a dry riverbed, for example, I would say something like, ‘Ah, it’s great to be young’, and would turn a blind eye to it.

But here, as soon as we had been done, both of us returned to our painfully embarrassing state with all our strength.

We who didn’t have any friends, were guilty of being fools, who thought we couldn’t be friends.

We were guilty of it.

It would be fine for someone to laugh at it. It had been nothing more than our pride after all.

We had put this pride of ours aside and continued forward.

“...Well then, the life consultation.”

Returning to a straight face, I said:

“...What to do.”

I was straight at the point.

“...What to do, huh?”

Rika answered my ‘please help me’ with an easy-going but reliable sounding reply, ‘sure’, but for some reasons it felt like her voice just now was unsure.

“...Huh?”

Turning towards me with a questioning gaze on her face, Rika said:

“...Please think about it, Kodaka-senpai. Rika hasn’t had any friends up until now.”

“Oh.”

“Some time ago, Senpai had said that Rika, ‘when it comes to socializing with superiors, you have communicative competence’. When it comes to non face-to-face business like socializing with your own generation, if Rika may speak her mind, even without my kind of communicative competence, you could do it. Source: Rika.”

“O-Oh.”

“When it comes to adults, even if they only have a bit of communicative competence, they are able to cover it up skillfully in a lot of situations. For example, take the time when the board chairman invited me to enroll into this academy, that was a splendid case of him leading me on the entire time.”

“Is that so...”

I personally couldn’t even imagine the picture of our board chairman using his words skillfully like that, but... rather than just ‘a weird old man who was friends with my dad’, he was also ‘a skilled person who was the board chairman of St. Chronical Academy’. I don’t think I had experienced that specific side of Kashiwazaki Pegasasu-san at that time.

Certainly, one person would not be able to know all aspects of someone, who had various sides to himself.

“And well, Rika can also at least read the atmosphere of things, but... Senpai is also the same when it comes to that, right?”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

I could read the atmosphere, but as to how to skillfully navigate around in that atmosphere, I really was completely different from her in that regard.

To be honest, if it was just about reading the atmosphere, then even a dog or a cat could do it.

After that, if you don’t know the appropriate actions to take, it is as if it all the prior goes to naught.

And well, until now I haven't been able to take action.

To keep the atmosphere flowing, I had been a bystander saying things like, 'Huh? What was that?', to try and dodge the question, and saying, 'Stop!', to forcibly break up the atmosphere.

I've been doing things like that over and over again.

Of course it's not like I wanted to behave this dishonest.

Even though I knew that it was the wrong thing to do, I didn't know what the right thing would have been.

When it comes to that, Rika differed from me — or so I thought.

“With that said...”

Rika took in a deep breath and then:

“Questions on how to understand the depths of human relationships, why would Rika be reliable when it comes to something like that?!”

“So you were just putting on an air!”

I retorted with all my strength to Rika, who was bluntly puffing out her chest, saying those things.

“‘If you run into a huge problem you can't solve by yourself, then come to Rika for help, Rika can make the impossible possible’, what happened to those reliable words you said?!”

“Tehehe... Rika was just going with the flow (・ω<)”

“Why you!”

I was greatly troubled by Rika's cute 'tehepero'.

“F-First off, let's figure out the situation.”

Saying that, Rika dodged the question.

“One week ago, Sena-senpai confessed to Kodaka-senpai.”

“...Ah.”

“And, not knowing what to do, Kodaka-senpai ran from the spot, and escaped reality by hanging out with the student council without showing his face in the clubroom. That's the situation we are in right now.”

“...T-That's true.”

Hearing that being mentioned again was shamefully embarrassing.

“...In order to beat up Kodaka-senpai, Rika spent several days in ‘Nine Lives Breaker’ to develop, and didn’t come to club activities. Rika heard the state of the clubroom from Yukimura-kun, however. Yukimura-kun has been coming to the clubroom as always since then, doing her usual things. Sena-senpai has also been coming to play her usual games since then... Those two have been steady the whole time.”

I nodded my head to Rika’s serious words.

“That’s right... I also heard that earlier from Yukimura.”

Kashiwazaki Sena and Kusunoki Yukimura.

Those two are strong.

Seriously strong, cool, and dazzling.

I don’t believe I could ever be anywhere as amazing as those two are.

“Kodaka-senpai hasn’t been coming anymore, so Kobato-san didn’t come, too. Maria-san would come occasionally to eat snacks.”

Of course, I knew that Kobato wasn’t going to the club room. And earlier I had also heard from Yukimura about Maria before I came to the rooftop.

“Now, about Yozora-senpai. After Kodaka-senpai ran off, Sena-senpai talked about when she did first fall in love with Kodaka-senpai. About the date at the pool that Yozora-senpai didn’t know about, staying over at Sena-senpai’s house that Yozora-senpai didn’t know about, having a study group with just the two of you that Yozora-senpai didn’t know about.”

Rika seemed uninterested while saying that, but her eyes didn’t seem happy at all, it was scary.

“...When Sena-senpai’s talk was finished, Yozora-senpai had left and hasn’t returned ever since.”

“For the time being, she’s at least properly coming to school, huh...?”

From the beginning, Yozora and I didn’t talk in the classroom, but since that day, we’ve found it difficult to look at each other and tried to avoid each other.

That’s why I didn’t really know what Yozora was thinking at the moment.

“That day when Yozora-senpai left the clubroom, her back was, how does Rika say it... completely like a dog with its tail between its legs... She didn’t say anything to Sena-senpai either. Neither crying nor getting angry, just leaving the club room, looking downhearted. Rika wonders if it’s already too late for her.”

“No way...”

To me, who showed a hopeless mood, Rika expressed a dry smile.

“It seems like you’ve got no choice but to go all-in or fold on this one.”

“All-in or fold... Something that reckless...”

If somehow I wasn’t able to recover, then...

Noticing the fear in me, Rika plainly set the truth out in front of me:

“If you’re not able to recover from it, we’ll think about it once it came to this, right? Rika thinks everything will turn out smoothly. Rika doesn’t think anything unexpected will happen. Rika has been thinking that since a little while ago when she beat up Senpai.”

That were pretty persuasive words.

“The main point is, you’re a cheeky bastard with no— a few friends. Things like ‘not hurting anyone’, or ‘not doing anything that would make it impossible to go back to how things were before’, those are great ideals. If you were a person who could skillfully solve a situation that complex, you wouldn’t have needed to enter the Neighbor’s Club in the first place, right?”

I understand that as well, but...

“...You know... You’re pretty rough, right?”

“R-Rough...?!”

For some reason Rika showed a face of regret.

“At least say that Rika has decisiveness please...”

“My bad, my bad.”

I couldn’t imagine for how long Rika had had the resolution to beat me up, but she wasn’t a fool.

Neither thickheaded nor rough or audacious. As someone who was more sensitive to others than most, I said the most suitable words to a woman like her:

“You—— have courage.”

“Above everything else, that’s what you praise me with?”

Rika's cheeks blushed and then she said,

“Anyway, let's get back to what we were talking about in the first place.”

“Oh.”

Rika looked me straight in the eyes and continued,

“——Kodaka-senpai, what do you think of Sena-senpai?”

About one month ago—— on the day of the athletic festival, in this same spot, the past me dodged the exact same question.

This time I would honestly answer without trying to dodge it.

“I love Sena.”

Those words came out of me unexpectedly smoothly.

“If that's the case...”, Rika smiled and then continued,

“You've already decided what you're going to do, right?”

“...Yeah, that's right.”

Nodding her head slowly to me, Rika let out a small sigh.

“Even though you asked me for help, I wasn't able to offer much assistance. Sorry, Senpai.”

“Don't say that, idiot. You really helped me out a lot.”

With Rika's words being mixed with a bit of self-mockery, I was able to see everything clearly.

Whatever would happen this time, I would have a friend standing by my side.

Today, I realized for the first time how reassuring something like that was.

Chapter 3: The Neighbors Club ' s Unfortunate ★★☆☆ Star System

Rika stayed behind on the rooftop and I walked alone on the academy premises that were illuminated by the setting sun. Continue. Continue forward.

The voices from the students doing club activities on the grounds were gradually getting distant.

I entered the chapel.

I walked in a corridor that had an air of tranquility to it and finally arrived at 'Lounge 4', the clubroom of the Neighbor's Club.

From here on I was going to give my reply to her confession.

From what I heard from Rika and Yukimura, Sena had always been coming to the clubroom and playing her games ever since then. So today as well Sena should surely be here.

I took a deep breath over and over, trying to kill the fear that was seizing my weak heart. However, no matter what I did I couldn't get rid of it, and then proceeded to grip the doorknob with a shivering hand.

If no one had came today I would look like an idiot, but—— I turned the doorknob and opened the door—— and almost as if she had been waiting for this to happen, Kashiwazaki Sena was standing there facing me.

"S-Sena."

I thought for sure that she would be playing her games, so when I entered the clubroom and instantly met her line of sight, my voice quivered nervously.

"You really came...", Sena said with a low voice.

"I received a text from Rika that you would be coming here so to wait in the clubroom."

Rather than almost-as-if, she literally was waiting for this to happen.

I was a bit bitter at Rika for arranging all this without my knowledge.

"...If that's the case, then you should know why I've come here, right?"

Responding to my timidly put inquiry, Sena's cheeks blushed and she nodded her head.

She was unfairly cute as usual.

Just by one little move my heart fluttered. Just by being here my mind feels like it was struggling to hold on. Just staring at her without averting my gaze was making my head dizzy.

I was desperately trying to cover up the state of my mind, and up until now I've managed to keep up my appearance. With Sena standing right in front of me, as well as thinking about my feelings for Sena, however, it took a considerable amount of effort from my mind to keep myself from telling a lie.

How I had been somehow able to keep my composure in front of her up till now, in addition to the time at the pool, the department store and the date, from the bottom of my heart, I believe it was some kind of miracle.

“Kodaka?”

Sena tilted her head at my silence.

In order to get a hold of myself, I clenched both of my hands so tightly my nails were biting in, then I said:

“Sena, I——”

At that time *both* of our ringtones went off at the same time.

From inside my bag came a ‘Piroriro~rin’, the ringtone that was selected by default.

From Sena’s pocket came a ‘You’ve got mail, Onee-chan♥’ in an anime voice that sounded a bit like Kobato.

... Why does that have to happen right now...

This is way too inopportune.

If it had just been either one of our cell phone’s ringing, we could have just ignored. However, both of our’s, Sena and mine, rang at the same time.

The possibility for both of us to have gotten a text at the same time from different people wasn’t nonexistent. But both of us didn’t really receive a lot of texts to begin with.

It’s probably not Rika so..., while hoping that my premonition of who the sender’s identity was, was wrong, Sena and me opened both our phones at the same time.

“Yozora?”, Sena said as her eyes widened.

“...Same here as well.”

The sender was, as I feared, Mikadzuki Yozora.

There was no subject. The body of the text was,

—[I’ve left on a journey. Please don’t search for me.]

““HAAAA?!””

Sena and me both yelled out in disarray at the same time.

“Wait, a journey?! What does she mean by that?!”

“L-Like I would know! For now let’s try hearing it from the person herself!”

I hurriedly called Yozora’s phone.

After seemingly dozens of seconds of ringing, however, I was sent to her voicemail.

It doesn’t seem she like she turned off the power, but...

“I’ll try calling her next then!”

Sena said and then called her but——

‘The person you’ve called is temporarily unavailable.’

I immediately overheard a message I hadn’t encountered before from Sena’s cell phone.

“Why is she blocking my number?!”

To Sena’s shouting I replied:

“Was that the message for a blocked number right now? This is my first time hearing it...”

“There’s no mistaking it. Whenever I call Kobato I get the same message.”

“...”

You’re blocked by Kobato, huh...?

Then the door to the clubroom opened.

The person who entered was Rika.

“Senpai, um...”

In Rika’s hand was her cellphone. I guess Rika must have received the same text, too.

“Ah, Sena and me both received the same message as well. From Yozora. We haven’t been able to call her though.”

“Honestly, that person is...”

With a stunned expression Rika sighed.

“For now since calling her is pointless please try sending her a text.”

“O-Oh, yeah.”

I send her a message saying, ‘What do you mean by that?’.

Almost immediately I received Yozora’s reply.

Title: My heart is

Body: Pocky[1]

“...It says her heart is Pocky.”

“Even though it’s a little cute, that’s an exquisitely annoying way of saying it.”

In any case, it seems her heart had been broken.

I sent her another message saying, ‘Did something happen?’.

After about 30 seconds had passed her reply arrived.

Title: Re: Re: My heart is

Body: I saw it on the rooftop.

“Wha...”

I was speechless.

Saying ‘I saw it on the rooftop’... Did Yozora see what happened?

The fight between Rika and me – It was just like the fight that happened ten years ago between Sora and Taka.

“Rooftop? What’s that about?”

Sena said wondering about the text she peered at.

With those words Rika guessed the contents of Yozora’s text.

“It seems she saw it, Yozora-senpai.”

“...That’s what it seems like.”

“...And the conclusion is, with a heart like Pocky she left on a journey, something like that.”

Rika let out a big sigh and then used her cell phone to make a call.

Yozora didn’t pick up, and just like with me, she was sent to Yozora’s voicemail.

“...Seriously, what a *good for nothing!*”

Rika murmured those words, sounding almost like she was spitting them out.

“Hey, Rika?”

Ignoring my curious self, Rika took in a deep breath and yelled:

“CUT THIS SHIT OUT! ARE YOU AN IDIOT OR SOMETHING?! DO YOU THINK IF YOU KEEP RUNNING AWAY FROM THINGS TIME AFTER TIME THAT HAPPINESS WILL JUST SOMEHOW FALL INTO YOUR LAP?! ONLY BEING JEALOUS ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND RESENTING REALITY, BUT NEVER DOING ANYTHING ABOUT IT YOURSELF! HELL IF RIKA CARES ANYMORE! IF YOU’RE GOING TO JUST BE LIKE A DOG WITH ITS TAIL BETWEEN ITS LEGS AND CHOOSE TO GO ON A JOURNEY ON YOUR OWN, WHY DON’T YOU JUST CHOOSE TO DIE ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD LIKE AN IDIOT AS WELL, YOU IDIOT!”

SNAP

With a considerably scary force, she ended the call.

To the flabbergasted Sena and me, Rika showed a frail smile and said:

“...Now Rika has done it...”

“You’ve certainly done it, huh...?”

I replied.

“...It seems like Rika went into enraged mode.”

“It seems that way.”

With a face that looked like it could break into tears any moment, she groaned.

“If you find it vexing don’t run off... Rika feels the same way, so please don’t run off, Yozora-senpai.”

I placed my hand on Rika’s head and slowly patted it.

“Mhm... I don’t really get it, but...”

Not really understanding how this was a bad situation, Sena opened her mouth with a disgruntled face and said:

“If you think about it a little, it’s that helpless creature we’re talking about. So even if she said she was leaving on a journey, something far away like a different country, there’s no way she is going anywhere far, right? Even if we think about the worst case, staying the night somewhere and then returning, isn’t that probably the most she can do?”

“...C-Certainly.”

“...It’s just as Sena-senpai says... If she just has been on the rooftop a while ago, then she shouldn’t have had enough time to prepare some cash or anything...”

With just her clothes on her, going off on a journey by herself and getting far enough that we weren’t able to catch up with her, no matter how I thought about it, something like that wasn’t possible.

It was likely she would just stay the night somewhere and then return home as usual.

Maybe I’m just thinking about this too seriously...?

“In general, something like ‘please don’t search for me’. Doesn’t that sound like she’s actually saying, ‘Please search for me.’?”

She said that, and then Sena put her cellphone back into her pocket.

“Isn’t it about time you make up your mind on whether or not you want to go out with me?
Come on, Kodaka!”

“H-Huh?”

“Continue!”

“Continue?”

“Continue the talk from earlier!”

“...!”

...That’s right.

I have to give my reply to Sena’s confession.

“...”

Sena went silent, her face turning slightly red, and then stared at me.

I stared back at her in return and slowly breathed in to prepare myself.

“...It would be better for Rika to leave, don’t you think?”

“...No, please stay here.”, I said.

Sena also didn’t say anything.

I clenched my fists strongly, once again took in a deep breath and then announced it to Sena:

“Sena. I love you.”

“...!”

Sena’s blue eye’s opened widely, and a look of delight appeared.

I continued with my words towards Sena:

“But, I can’t go out with you.”

“Eh?”, Sena said and gave me a blank stare.

Trying to comprehend the meaning of my words, her eyes blinked repeatedly. Before long, a look of astonishment appeared on her face.

“Wh-What?! W-What do you mean?!”

To the Sena who was in disarray I slowly started to pile on more things.

“I love you. I want to do various things with you together, various things like d-dirty things with you. I want to do.”

“Dirty...?!”

Sena’s face turned bright red.

While my face was also burning up I continued:

“Like those games you are always playing... I want to do s-sexual things like that! A lot! Whenever I see you it turns me on incredibly. Ever since I first met you that’s how it’s always been. Since the time I first stayed over at your house, when I accidentally saw your naked body, that was incredibly dangerous, you know? If I hadn’t been able to control myself while laying in the same bed as your old man, I don’t know what could have happened!”

“W-W-W-W-W-What are you trying to say, dummy!”

Remembering what happened at that time, Sena was on the verge of tears.

“When everyone went to the beach for the training camp as well, I accidentally saw your breasts again. That time I saw them a considerable amount of times. Your breasts... Your boobs are the best! I want to see them over and over again!”

“GO DIE!”

I didn’t really understand why Sena was no longer behaving as if she were embarrassed but was now angry at me, but I kept pushing forward:

“I’ve always wanted to do as I liked with your breasts! Right now as well I honestly want to touch them and squeeze them and bury my face in them! Not just your boobs either, I want to touch your legs and butt as well! I want to kiss you as well! If we became lovers, I would be able to do things like that as much as I wanted to! Amazing!”

“I-I wouldn’t let you do what you want to do to me, as much as you want to do it all the time, what are you saying?!”

Sena shouted something out, but I didn’t really understand it.

Haha, it seems like I have built up a considerable amount of confusion... If we are lovers, I guess it would be decided that I can’t squeeze her boobs whenever I want to.

“...Doing dirty things with you, squeezing your boobs to my hearts content and doing various sexy things with you, it’s already the best I could ever dream of! Being able to have a monopoly on you, if something like that, something that I could only ever dream of, happened, it would bring the greatest happiness to me! That would also be like a dream! A miracle!”

“Uuu~, I’m not listening to what you’re saying...!”

The trembling and shaking Sena was adorable.

To that unbelievably cute girl I then said:

“But, I can’t go out with you!”

I declared it once again.

“If I went out with you, then the Neighbor’s Club as it is right now would fall apart. For me, the Neighbor’s Club’s existence is one in which I was able to meet you, and one where I was able to tell you that I love you, both of which are amazing miracles in their own right! That’s why—”

I then immediately stared at her directly in order to make my point.

I went down on my knees, put both my hands out in front of me, and deeply lowered my head all the way to the floor.

It was the so-called ‘prostrating oneself’.

“I will try to endure it, too, so please endure it yourself as well!”

I prostrated myself and then earnestly requested that of Sena.

When a Japanese man insists on someone departing from a principle of theirs even though he knew it to be an unreasonable request, it was customary to decide on performing Dogeza[2].

“In order to protect the Neighbor’s Club as such, I won’t go out with you! I won’t go out with anyone else from the Neighbor’s Club either!”



This was my answer.

The Neighbor's Club and Kashiwazaki Sena, which one is more important, which one I should choose over the other, I couldn't do something like that.

That's why I chose both.

And thus this was the wish of mine, I needed more than just my own strength to make it come true.

“Sena, In order to protect the Neighbor's Club, please cooperate with me! Please also endure it together with me!”

Just arbitrarily rejecting Sena on my own wasn't good enough.

Being hurt by my rejection, harboring bad feelings towards me and the other club members, and then leaving the Neighbor's Club because of that, that was something I absolutely couldn't let happen.

I definitely didn't want anything that would cause someone to become unhappy happen.

That's why I will persuade Sena.

To endure it together.

For the sake of the Neighbor's Club endure it together with me.

After accepting the feelings we had for each other – I dared to draw a line.

After I had put my feelings face to face and came to grips with them head on – I dared to endure it.

After I hadn't lied or pretended not to hear, laying my honest feelings bare – I compelled her to endure.

That was perhaps a very unnatural thing to do.

Perhaps, all I was doing was to delay the conclusion.

I was fully aware of that.

“...You, do you really mean that?”

With a bewildered look on her face, Sena looked down upon me and said that.

“Yeah. I really do.”

I raised my head and immediately looked Sena back in the eyes.

In this world we live in there surely must be situations in which absolutely only one answer among many important others must be chosen.

There are probably times when you absolutely have no choice but to give something up.

Times when you have no choice but to hurt someone, certainly things like that exist.

Nonetheless, as if I was drunk off some cheap heroism, before I prepared my resolve and made a decision, until I reached the very end of my limits, I wanted to search for a way where no one would get hurt.

I wanted to think about the situation I was in, where I really couldn't avoid making a decision to the very end.

‘Whatever happens, my decision was absolutely correct’, I didn't think that way at all.

‘Prepare yourself to hurt someone’, I didn't want to do something like that until the very end of the end.

Enduring myself, and the forcing others to endure it as well, I knew it wasn't the path that would bring everyone the greatest happiness.

However, myself, as well as Rika, Yukimura, Kobato, Maria, and Yozora, a way for everyone to receive a three star satisfaction rating[3], I unfortunately didn't think something like that was possible.

If someone who had the highest level of happiness would cause someone else to become unhappy, I wanted to choose the unfortunate course that would bring everyone a 2½ star happiness rating.

The Neighbor's Club having been a place where someone was able to be themselves and not having to hold back, something like that was just an illusion of mine.

In the fight with Rika, this illusion had been shattered.

—“You don't want to lose the place where you can be yourself!? Well that's just great, aren't you admirable! But you're still wrong!”

—”*Because, you’re holding back and are not being yourself!*”

I recalled Rika’s shouting.

Certainly, I really had been holding back.

For me, the Neighbor’s club hadn’t been a place where I could be myself without holding back.

For me, the Neighbor’s club was really—— a place where I had to hold myself back, yet a place I wanted to be at.

Keeping up these peaceful ordinary days of mine forever had also just been an illusion of mine, the truth was that they had been days that consisted of an extremely dangerous balance that could have collapsed at any second.

Not just these ordinary days either.

Talking with Aoi and Hinata-san, while helping out the student council, I realized that those guys, who we arbitrarily had decided to call ‘normals’, who we arbitrarily had decided to envy and be jealous of, each and every one of them had their own problems and yet continued to live on.

It seemed like in order to protect the illusion that these commonplace ‘peaceful ordinary days’ could be seen anywhere, we would all just heave a sigh and in the background go to great efforts not to be honest to ourselves.

People would probably say that this great effort to not being ourselves was ‘deception’—— However, I had a different word for this, I called it ‘kindness’ and I think it was a very precious thing.

In the Neighbor’s Club’ case, I didn’t believe that I could justify an excuse which would allow our easy ways of life to keep flowing. While seeing the strain on me up till then, as well as Rika’s, who held herself back and supported everyone from behind the scenes, that this kindness of hers had no meaning? It didn’t seem to me like that in any way whatsoever.

It’s fine if it’s not correct.

It’s fine if it’s not wrong.

For me—— I just want this kindness to exist.

After being beaten up by Shiguma Rika and finally arriving at a decision after going round and round, this was my wish.

That's why I'm going to wager on Sena's kindness.

“And if I said I don't want to?”

Sena looked down upon me with a cold and indifferent gaze and asked that.

“Then I will try to persuade you.”

“And if I still said I don't want to?”

“Then I'll try even harder to persuade you.”

“...Kodaka, do you understand what you're saying?”

“I do.”

“You don't understand at all!”

Sena became enraged and shouted.

“Even though we both like each other, instead of going out with each other, we have to keep going like before?! Do you really think such a laughable answer is permissible?!”

“It's no matter of whether it's permissible or not! It's a matter of you permitting it! I beg of you, please allow it!”

I stared back into the angry gaze that had a bloodthirst in it, and shouted that back.

“Y-You are...”

Sena was overwhelmed for an instant and her expression faltered.

“...I loathe the idea of having to endure it, you know?!”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I want to get my hands on everything I want, you know?! Things like enduring it, compromising, I loathe them so much it almost makes me want to throw up! Doing things that an ordinary person wouldn't have the power to stick through with, that's just the perfect kind of person that I am, you know?!”

“Yeah. It’s because of things like that that I fell in love with you. I love your dazzling way of living life head on, not behaving like an ordinary person like me.”

“...S-Stop saying ‘love’ over and over again, it’s embarrassing.”

This shy face Sena suddenly showed was also cute.

It made my heart skip a beat.

Sena and I stared at each other for a good while without saying anything.

Cheeks blushing.

Eyes tearing up.

Chests throbbing.

From an outsider’s perspective, we looked just like a fresh couple, probably—— But don’t get confused, this was a battle between Sena and me.

And then at last the battle concluded.

Sena softly averted her eyes and then whispered:

“...For now, I’ll do as you say.”

“Sena...!”

Sena raised her eyebrows at my wide opened eyes and put on an angry expression.

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea, okay?!”

From Sena’s mouth came those tsundere-like words.

“I-I’m not really giving my consent to what you said, okay?!”

Sena shouted that, her face went bright red.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Kodaka! I will endure it for you, but that’s only because I love you!”

Her words weren't anything like a Tsundere, and they could in no way be understood as anything but a direct declaration of love. Their destructive power was greater than any tsundere bishoujo's that I had ever seen in a light novel or manga.

Even though I made a blunder on that, I became even more infatuated with Kashiwazaki Sena.

“...But I mean, honestly, I was also disillusioned at the time you showed off that loser attitude of yours... ‘He is a boring guy after all’, I thought.... But... doing something interesting like this here, I don't dislike that.”

To Sena who was grumbling somewhat displeased I said,

“Eh? What—”

‘What was that?’, I reflected on my words and suddenly realized it.

‘What was that?’, that phrase had already been sealed off.

I had stopped pretending that I couldn't hear, and in its place said:

“...Thank you, Sena.”

Like this I—— I was able to come to a compromise with that Kashiwazaki Sena.

The first battle of this good for nothing protagonist had ended in a most spectacular victory.

Chapter 4: Dark Knight

After I had given my reply to Sena's confession, Sena, Rika, and me had a discussion in light of Yozora's text 'I'm going on a journey'.

However, it wasn't possible for us to understand more about Yozora's message than what it said, so for the time being I wrote, 'Don't go to a dangerous places, okay?', and sent to her. We didn't receive a reply to that from Yozora.

If for some reason Yozora didn't come to school tomorrow, we'd go to her house and search around there or something, but for today we were done.

While still wearing my dirtied school uniform, I stopped by at the supermarket on the way home and bought stuff for dinner, knowing that once I returned home I wouldn't be able to bring up the energy or willpower to go out again.

Along the way to the supermarket I took a small detour.

There were plenty of places within walking distance to my house, I walked past the elementary school I once attended and after walking for another three odd minutes I came upon it.

A public park.

It was a small park with nothing more than the minimum playground equipment which were a sandbox, a horizontal bar, and a swing set. Since it was already dark, there weren't any children playing around.

At this park where I had first met Sora at, Sora and I, who both went to different schools, would meet up after school and play. Since I returned to this town, I would pass it every once in a while when I was going shopping and the like, today was the first time I've set this park itself as my destination.

Maybe by some chance Yozora had came here – that was what I had thought.

I carefully looked all around inside the park, but Yozora was nowhere to be found.

...After all, things don't work out that conveniently, I guess...

I really hope that girl didn't go to any dangerous place...

While having anxious thoughts in my mind, I left the park and headed towards the supermarket.



I was done shopping and returned home. Inside the kitchen I found Kobato scrounging through the refrigerator.

“Ke?! K-Kukuku... I-I’ve grown tired of waiting for my other half.”

Kobato said, and closed the refrigerator in a flustered state.

It was almost 7 P.M., so she had probably just been hungry and was looking for a snack.

“I’m going to make dinner right now so just wait a bit.”

Needing to prepare my uniform for the next day, I entered the dressing room and changed clothes while saying that to Kobato.

“Kukuku... This night my thirst for blood is ravenous.... It would be good to prepare a bigger sacrifice than usual... I-I wouldn’t mind if thee made about twice as much...”

“You’re that hungry? Well, I don’t really care, but...”

I didn’t have much time to make an elaborate meal, so I’ll make a large amount of spinach and bacon pasta to satisfy Kobato’s wishes, then I’ll make some salad and consommé soup.

While I was preparing the meal, Kobato, who usually wouldn’t come to help me if I didn’t call her, was setting the table without a word from me.

“...Did something happen with you?”

Kobato shook her head left and right to me who had become suspicious, and dodged the question with a, ‘Nothing at all.’.

Well, it’s fine...

After I had put the meal on the table, both of us said ‘itadakimasu’ simultaneously and started to eat.

Contrary to how allegedly hungry she was, Kobato’s eating pace was slower than usual.

I knew it, something strange is going on...

Since the day I had ran away from Sena, Kobato didn’t seem to have gone to any club activities.

In front of my blood-related sister I had shown such a disgraceful side of myself, so I also found it difficult to talk about club activities. But thinking about Kobato, it was awkward that we continued our daily lives in the house as usual.

“...Is it possible you know about Yozora?”

BANG

Kobato dropped her fork and was quivering. Bullseye.

“I see... So you also got that text.”

“Ah, yeah...”

Kobato made a small nod.

Yukimura had also reported that she received the text, so it seemed that girl had sent the text out to all members of the Neighbor's Club.

“Are you also worried? About Yozora.”

“Mhm...”

“...It's okay, I'm certain she'll return immediately.”

Endeavoring to give her peace of mind, I calmly said:

“...Even making Kobato worry. Honestly, that chap is...”

I carelessly let slip a voice with disgust mixed in it.

And then.

“T-That person...”

Kobato, for some reason, turned her gaze to me as if blaming me for something.

“Hm?”

Kobato's cheeks blushed a little and then:

“...T-That person, I don't dislike her.”

“Ehh?!”

Hearing those words come out from the Kobato who was scared of strangers, I let a truly astonished voice.

“T-That person is... always protecting us from that ferocious monster... The other day too, she took that weird red person away...”

“...Ferocious monster, do you mean Sena?”

“...Mhm.”

With an unpleasant look on her face, Kobato nodded her head multiple times.

The weird red person from the other day... She probably means Aoi.

At that time she had tried to shut down the Neighbor's Club. She marched straight into the clubroom and told Kobato that she wasn't permitted to participate in club activities since she was from the middle school section.

At that time the one who made it clear that there had been no problem with Kobato being in the Neighbor's Club, as well as defeated Aoi in an argument, was Yozora.

About always protecting her from Sena though... Certainly, now that it was mentioned, whenever Sena went overboard in her messing around with Kobato, the one who would smack Sena with a flyswatter and stop her rampage had always been Yozora.

Even though Yozora herself didn't have those intentions, Kobato was only concerned with the end result and ended up thinking of her as a 'Person who always protects me'.

“...E-Eh... So you... you like Yozora then?”

Upon hearing that, Kobato's face blushed increasingly more and somewhat embarrassingly made a small nod.

Like that it seemed like we were talking about a girl she was in love with.

“...Kukuku... In order to safeguard myself, I, the noble of the night, Leysis Vi Felicity Sumeragi, hath summoned forth a jet black shadow knight of darkness from the dark past...”

What the...

In the short time that I had averted my eyes from reality, before I knew it my little sister had been captured by Yozora.

I was so astonished by it that it didn't even come to mind to retort that 'jet black', 'shadow', and 'darkness' all were similar.

'Summoned forth from the dark past', I thought that expression seemed to fit that person a bit.

But still, Kobato has been... by that Yozora, huh...?

Even though it's unexpected, if this is something that helps Kobato get over her shyness of strangers, then I should probably welcome it.

I wonder what Sena would say if she knew this...

On one hand Kobato has blocked her number, and on the other she has the knight that's protecting her.

...Now that I mention, Sena... I should probably also tell Kobato about what happened today.

Kobato is a member of the Neighbor's Club after all.

“Ah... Hey, Kobato.”

I addressed Kobato, who was squirming about while eating her pasta.

“Mhm?”

“I returned to club activities today.”

Kobato's eyes widened.

“Really?”

“Yeah. That's why you can come to club activities tomorrow too.”

“Kukuku... Very well, I shall return to thy low-lives who I deem worthy of my clan.”

After saying those lively words in the style of Leysis, Kobato's expression became downcast.

“...Ah, but... that... um... that person will...”

With an uneasy look in her face, Kobato murmured those words in a low voice.

“Talking about Sena?”

Kobato nodded her head.

“Today, I told Sena that I love her.”

Even though I thought saying something like that to my little sister was embarrassing, I said it nonetheless.

“AN-CHAAAAN!”

With an expression of despair that looked like Munch's ‘The Scream’ Kobato shouted.

“AN-CHAN! NO, ONII-SAMA!”

“O-Onii-sama?!”

I was shocked at being called that for the first time in my life.

With an ultra serious face that I had never seen before, Kobato stared at me and said:

“EVEN THOUGH IT’S A JOKE I CAN’T FORGIVE YOU SAYING SOMETHING SO DISGUSTING! NO, PLEASE DON’T SAY THINGS LIKE THAT!”

Kobato surprised me by turning to honorific language to try and entreat me with tears welling up in her eyes.

S-She dislikes Sena that much... To even say she’s disgusting...

“Fuuuu~~ fugugugu, gurururu...!”

“Well, um... The thing about loving her wasn’t a joke, I was serious.”

“AN-GYAGEGACHAN?!”

“There’s no reason for your mind to go crazy! This is my true self! But I mean it’s not like we’re going out or anything at all, so there’s no need to worry.”

I tried to quickly explain to Kobato who seemed like a wild animal that had been agitated.

About how I didn’t intend to date anyone from the Neighbor’s Club, also that I said to Sena that for now I would just accept her feelings.

“Fuuuu~~ Fuuu~~ Fuuu~~”

After I had finished Kobato’s agitated state continued for a little while.

“...But really Kobato, Sena really does have some good parts to—”

“FUNGYA!!”

As soon as Sena’s name came up, Kobato who had just calmed down, instantly went feral again.

...I guess talking about Sena is taboo for a while.

Even though that person said that she’d get everything she wanted, if I for example had chosen Sena over the Neighbor’s Club, in this state Kobato definitely would not have any intentions of yielding to her.

“Fuuu...”

Kobato stopped her savagery with a deep breath, and placed her fork on her plate like that.

“Kobato?”

“My mood this night hath become ill... I shall have this offering in my area of darkness...”

She said that with a stern face, then took her plate that still had quite a bit of pasta left on it and went up to her room on the second floor.

“When you’re finished eating, clean up your dishes!”

I said that for the time being and then continued eating by myself.



Let’s reflect. The things that happened on the rooftop today...

I had replied to Rika with ‘I love Sena’ and then parted ways with her and headed towards the clubroom. The truth is though, there actually was a continuation to that...

“Ah, by the way, Kodaka-senpai. While we’re on the subject there’s something Rika would like to hear.”

“Hm?”

“What do you think of everyone, with the exception of Sena-senpai. To put it simply, what do you think of Yukimura-kun and Yozora-senpai?”

Staring directly at me, Rika asked that of me.

I replied to her with how I honestly felt in my heart.

“I like Yukimura... Probably.”

“Eh?!”

Upon hearing my reply, Rika started to shake quite considerably.

“Ah, no, I don’t understand it exactly, but... How do I say it... Y-Yukimura makes my heart flutter a bit...”

“A bit, huh? W-Well is that, um, do you mean ‘like’ as in, like a member of the opposite sex?”

“P-Probably, yeah... I think?”

I hesitated while answering.

Earlier, I clearly declared that I loved Sena, but now that I thought about it, for me to be able to say such a thing was pretty surprising.

But not just Sena, it was an unmistakable truth that I had also become interested in Yukimura.

“W-When did this happen?!”

I replied to Rika who was leaning forward and asking that of me:

“Eh? Ah... Since back then, I think.”

“Back then?!”

“Yeah. Before your text came calling me up here, I happened to bump into her, it was at that time when I started to think that...”

“...Yukimura-kun, to be able to do such an incredible thing in such a short time... Setting such a huge flag...”

In the first place, when we had been to the pool together and were changing in the locker room, I was quite shocked, because I still had thought Yukimura was a guy at that time.

Whenever it had become more clear that Yukimura might be a woman, I persuaded myself with, ‘this person’s a guy’, so I didn’t deem it necessary to hold myself back. When Yukimura suddenly showed me her sweet and pure innocence with every little thing she did, it made my heart jump.

To be honest, if I count the amount of times I’ve honestly thought, ‘this person’s cute’, unfortunately for Sena, I’ve thought it a lot more about Yukimura.

And, even though under normal circumstances I thought she was charming, when I saw her before I came to the rooftop, the strength of her will was something unwavering.

—Does it have to make sense?

—*Does it have to be necessary?*

—*I stay by Aniki's side because I want to.*

Those words of Yukimura's greatly influenced my reply to Sena's confession.

Even though sometimes I was a little surprised by what goes on in her head, her tidiness and sweetness, calmness and soft manners, and yet despite all that being so strong-willed, I honestly idolized it.

To be honest, I think I would still be fascinated by it even if Yukimura was a man.

“...Well, Yukimura is a good woman... So Rika can understand how you came to like her.”

Looking somewhat unsatisfied, Rika continued:

“And, what do you think of Yozora-senpai?”

“...”

I went silent.

After pounding on it for a while, I nervously opened my mouth.

“...How do I say this... I don't know how I feel about honestly saying it...”

“Please tell me, aren't we friends?”

Rika urging me on only made me hesitate even more.

“...Well, even if you say that we're friends, telling a girl like you would kind of make me feel bad...”

“Haa?”

“Ah, no, it doesn't really have anything to do with being a man or being a woman... It's kind of like... It's something that wouldn't make me feel very good if I was told or had to say it...”

“Haa? What do you mean?”

“Well, it's like... What if I told someone and then they thought, ‘Wow what an unpleasant person’, kind of like that.”

“You're being evasive, Senpai. If it's Rika, then no matter what you say, it will be fine.”

“...Really?”

“Yes.”

Rika, with a serious face, nodded her head encouragingly.

I changed my mind reluctantly.

“...I understand, I'll say it. To tell you the truth about this, you know, you will be the only person I've seriously said it to, okay?”

“Yes.”

“...I'm going to say how I feel about Yozora, okay?”

“Yes.”

“...I'm just going to get straight to the point, all right?”

“Yes.”

“Heavy.”

I expressed my feelings directly using that one word.

“Ah...”

With a worn-out face, neither showing amazement nor criticism or acceptance, she let out an awkwardly vague sigh.

“...Well, Rika understands.”

“Ah... Thank you...”

I was no longer the Taka I once had been.

It's the same like I knew that since the day where I first came to realize that Mikadzuki Yozora was Sora, she hadn't been the same Sora I once knew.

Even though finding out that the person that I ages ago thought was a boy, was actually in fact a girl was certainly a decisive reason, more than that, her direct approach as well as her brave and

kind sense of justice that she was overflowing with, now she was... Well... Mikadzuki Yozora seemed to be a totally different person.

Sora would have definitely never said something like, 'Normals can go die'.

However, as for how Yozora considered me — reuniting and becoming companions of the Neighbor's Club as 'Mikadzuki Yozora and Hasegawa Kodaka', and spending almost half a year together — even with all that, she still thought of me as 'Taka'.

The amount of time that Sora and I had spent together here had probably been less than half a year.

Even though the amount of time isn't too important... Our time together in the Neighbor's Club had already been longer.

—Today seems to be just like that.

—Just like ten years ago.

I hate to say this so happily, but Yozora... I might have thought of you as a boy ten years ago, but now it is impossible to see you as anything but a beautiful girl... Yozora's face flashed up in front of my eyes.

At that time this had been how I replied.

—I see, certainly it seems a little bit like back then.

With 'seems' and 'little bit' I had tried to implicitly convey to Yozora that it was different now... It seemed the message didn't reach Yozora, however.

There was a great gap in commitment between Yozora who clinged to the memories from ten years ago even now, and me who cut himself off from what had happened back then.

During these ten years I had moved and changed schools many times, many things had happened in my life during those ten years, and even though I couldn't really make any friends, I still had many fond memories from back then.

Even if the days I had spent with Sora shone more brightly than the other days before I joined the Neighbor's Club, fact is that in these ten years that had passed, those days represented nothing more than one single page of many months and years that had gone by.

Or is it just that I was cruel?

Surely many things had happened to Yozora during those ten years too, right?

I just couldn't honestly feel happy when I heard her say, 'I'm so glad you didn't forget me in those ten years.'

Yozora faced me with ten years' worth of memories. She had held those memories dear to the point, where she made light of the ones we had made in the Neighbor's Club.

'Why go this far?', a question to be asked with confusion and hesitation.

'That's just unreasonable!', to be said with surprise, amazement and doubt.

In the end, what I thought about Mikadzuki Yozora was something even I wasn't sure of.

To begin with, were the emotions that Yozora harbored for me love? Were they feelings of friendship? Was it dependence, or a desire to monopolize? Or was it something other than all of that...?

It wouldn't be stupid to bet that Yozora herself didn't know what it was.

These heavy feelings of anxiety and worrying about not knowing what to do and say when we met each other... I didn't know what to do with it.

Despite everything though, I could clearly see that Yozora had started to care much more for the Neighbor's Club recently. Not to mention that Yozora herself was changing... Most probably in a good direction... That's what I thought at least.

...But even though I was thinking all this, I didn't tell Rika anything about it.

I mean, no matter how you put it, this was speaking ill of someone behind their back.

I didn't want to show any of that to the friend, who I had gone through great pains to finally make.



I opened my eyes and it was 12 o'clock at night.

It seemed like I fell asleep right after I went back to my room once I had finished dinner.

My body ached all over and my fatigue still hadn't disappeared.

My desire to go back to sleep crept up again, but I remembered that I still had homework for tomorrow so I had no choice but to get up.

For the time being I thought I should take a shower to freshen myself up, and once my homework would be settled, I could go back to sleep.

And so I went out of my room and went downstairs.

There, the lights were on.

Is Kobato still awake?

But as I couldn't see Kobato in the living room, I went to the kitchen with suspicion.

I was feeling hungry and thirsty, so I decided to open the fridge for a snack before I went to shower.

Huh...? The milk – I'm sure it was here when I came home, now it's gone.

Could it be that Kobato drank all of it...?

At that moment, however, my eyes caught the sight of a Cola bottle which was still in the fridge. A question came to my mind. I knew for a fact that if given the choice, Kobato would without doubt choose Cola over milk.

Yet... the Cola bottle is unopened and the milk's missing...?

Oh well, even Kobato probably has times where she drinks milk, huh...? I shouldn't think too much into it and just have a look into the cupboard where I put the sweets.

It contains a fair deal less than when I checked it yesterday...

She already ate extra on dinner and now sweets?

I won't say that it's impossible, but... something feels off.

Now that I think about, all of Kobato's behaviour since I came home has been abnormal.

She requested a bigger portion for dinner, helped out on her own and even made up a reason to act angry and take the food back to her room...

If I remember it right, something like this has happened a couple of years ago...

Back then, Kobato had still been in her early years of elementary school and she happened to find an abandoned cat in the neighborhood, she then started to sneak food out of the house to feed it.

However, sadly Kobato's cat allergy had been her undoing. The family discovered the matter after she had started to develop asthma-like symptoms and coughing.

After that, my father arranged for the cat to be given to a new owner, and after having scolded Kobato after she had recovered, he held her saying, 'I'm so relieved', again and again while he cried.

This too was another nostalgic memory now.

In any case, the fact that no signs of her allergy had come out today meant at least that it was not a cat. A dog or something perhaps?

Anyway, as Kobato's Onii-chan, I couldn't let a secret like that just slip by.

At that moment, I noticed the sound of water running in the shower.

It seemed that Kobato was taking a shower.

Or maybe she was washing this dog (?) she had picked up while I had been asleep! I dashed towards the bath immediately after realizing this.

"Hey, Kobato! You—"

While saying that I opened the bathroom door.

What I found there was neither a cat nor a dog but a helpless creature.

"Nnfaa...?"

Letting out strangely captivating gasps she turned around to face me.

Her slender figure was covered by white bubbles, her left hand held the shower head, her right hand was covering her abdomen and her black hair had been glazed by the water as her eyes became ecstatic and her face bright red.



For some reason, Mikadzuki Yozora was there, taking a shower in our house.

“Eh...?”

Perhaps because she hadn't accepted the reality in front of her eyes yet, Yozora kept staring at me with a blank face.

My brain, too, had ceased to function, overloaded with all this confusion.

Perhaps this is just a dream?, I started to seriously think this.

Wait, isn't this really a dream after all? I slept while still thinking of Yozora after all, I'm sure this is why I'm seeing a dream like this... But still, the content makes me feel like I'm gonna drown in self-disgust.

“Kukuku , I have brought the towel, my knight——”

It wasn't a dream.

I heard a voice and turned around. It was kobato who just entered the bathroom.

“Gyaa?!”

Kobato unleashed a scream.

And right after that followed a, ‘Ah?! Hiya, heeh?! Ko-Koda, yaa, hiii, hoou!’. Screaming such incomprehensible words, Yozora raised both her hands to cover her chest and crouched down.

As my head turned fully white inside, I went out of the bathroom in silence.

At that moment, I happened to notice that a girl's uniform from St. Chronica Academy and pink-coloured underwear which didn't belong to Kobato had been in the laundry basket.

“Ahh, umm, An-chan...”

I put my hand on fidgeting Kobato's head and patted it saying, ‘Let's talk about it later.’, and then left.



Approximately ten minutes later, in the Hasegawa household's dining room.

Opposite of me sat Kobato and Yozora while hugging their own knees.

Yozora was wearing a school jersey. Her hair had still been wet when she hurriedly had come out of the bathroom, so she had a bath towel on her head.

“...Now then, Kobato.”

Still wondering about what to do with them, I directed my words at Kobato for now.

“...What is *this*?”

“.....Da-Dark knight...”

Kobato replied with a small voice and trembling eyes.

“Yes... And what is the dark knight doing in our house?”

“I-I’ve picked it up...”

“Dark knights are forbidden in our house. Go and return it to where you found it.”

“I-I’ll look after it properly!”

“I won’t let you. You’re bad at waking up early, right? If you can’t take care of it, then it’s only natural for it to be thrown out.”

“B-But I can take care of it! I’ll take it out on a walk everyday and I’ll help out when you need me!”

“...Am I a pet?”

In the conversation between Kobato and me which had somehow turned into something like a talk between father and child, dark knight-san retorted in a peevish way.

“...And? What is the meaning of this, Yozora?”

“...”

Yozora made a face that seemed like she would cry any moment and started to explain the situation.

She explained how she had seen me today... No, yesterday, running hurriedly towards the roof after school.

How she then had followed me and peeked at the sight of Rika and me fighting from the entrance to the rooftop.

How she hadn't been able to bear the sight of Rika and me declaring our friendship after the fight had ended, left the rooftop and then dashed out of school right away.

Heartbroken, she had come up with the idea of going on a journey and sent a text message to all club members saying, 'I've left on a journey. Please don't search for me.'

"Declaring I will go out on a journey and all is good, but... I had no money and no destination, more importantly, I didn't have the courage to do it... With no hopes and dreams, or practically anything necessary for that matter... I asked myself, 'Does my life have any worth at all?', or something like that, hahaha..."

Yozora laughed at her self-torture.

It was so pitiful I couldn't join in on the laugh at all...

Even though she was making fun of herself, if she was able to joke about it, then she was probably alright, I thought...

"But it's true that I wanted to just disappear somewhere, and I didn't really want to go back home... before I knew it, I found myself going to the park we used to play in ten years ago."

It seems my hunch hadn't been wrong after all.

"...I stayed on that bench for quite a while after that, and around the time the sun had completely set, Sumeragi happened to find me there."

"So you call Kobato 'Sumeragi', eh...?"

I just had to jab on that first.

Now that I thought about it, I had never heard Yozora call Kobato by her name before, it had always been, 'Kodaka's little sister'.

"It's because she told me she wanted to be called that way..."

"Eh?"

I turned my eyes towards Kobato.

"Kukuku, I, Leysis Vi Felicity Sumeragi, have exclusively allowed her to maketh use of my giventh name."

Kobato laughed happily for some reason.

“...And why were you hiding yourself with Kobato to begin with?”

Upon hearing this question, Yozora's face started looking downhearted, she then answered:

“It's because I didn't want to face you, Kodaka...”

“I get that you wouldn't want to see someone you just told, ‘Please don't look for me.’ ... But why did you have to write it in such a worrisome way? If you wanted to travel to ease your heartache, weren't there other ways to phrase that message? You didn't answer our calls, and your messages only resulted in confirming our worries.”

Sena knew all along that ‘Yozora can't pull such a big stunt off.’ If she didn't, she would probably have went out looking for her worriedly.

“.....I wanted you to worry a little...”

Yozora said that somewhat awkwardly, almost like a sulking child.

“Saying you want me to worry... Come on...”

Saying she wanted me to worry about it more, it seemed like Sena's prediction was right on the spot.

“Kukuku... Yes, I understand indeed.”

Kobato demonstrated her sympathy with Yozora and nodded strongly. Now that she said that, I remembered that Kobato, too, wanted me to dote on her from time to time.

“Haaaa... Seriously, you...”

To the deeply sighing me Kobato said:

“So... An-chan...”

She looked at me puppy-eyed and said:

“Can the dark knight stay with us?”

“Kodaka...”

Yozora was now also looking at me with eyes that were like those of a kitten which had been cast away...

“No. You have to put it back... is what I'd like to say, but... we're already in the middle of the night, so...”

There was no doubt that throwing her out at that time of the night wouldn't have been wise.

“Wait a minute, Yozora. You did contact your home, right?”

“...No.”

Yozora put on a grim expression as she shook her head.

“Ehh?! That's really bad, isn't it?! If you stay out until this time, your parents will get worried—
—”

“They won't.”

Yozora interrupted me with a flat-out denial.

“They won't do something like that. Even if I don't go back home or to school. What I do and where I do it, is something they don't worry about.”

Yozora put on a face that seemed as if she would cry any second now.

“I'm sure that even if I did really go out on a journey, or they would get contacted about my absence from school, or if I was arrested, they would probably rather see it as a bother than worrying about me....”

I didn't know anything about Yozora's situation at home at all.

What I knew about Sora ten years ago had been the fact that she lived in an apartment and was an only child. In fact, I had never even visited her place before.

Sora did neither tell me much about himself back then, nor had I been all too interested in knowing.

I didn't really want to bring school stuff into our play sessions either, so naturally a situation had developed where both of us avoided prying too deep into each other's personal life.

As long as the time we spent together was enjoyable I hadn't been worried about anything else.

This little information available to me about Sora's family——

——You don't need to go as far as making a hundred friends, just make true friends which you can care about that are worth a hundred. Even if it is just one single friend – one single friend who cares for you more than anyone in the world like you do for him, your life will become more brilliant than it has ever been——

That was something Sora's mother was supposed to had have said.

I had become a bit curious due to her using the singular 'mother' instead of 'parents' back then.

Mikadzuki Yozora often ordered things through the internet nowadays, she also went to family restaurants and karaoke alone. So it didn't seem like she had any financial troubles.

But maybe I should ask her about it further... About Yozora's family situation... It really weighs heavy on my shoulders, but should I really stick my nose into it any further...?

As I was lost in thought:

“Hatchu!”

Yozora unleashed a cute sneeze.

She was taking a shower until a moment ago after all... It would be bad if she caught a cold due to the chill.

“...It can't be helped, right? Stay over for tonight.”

“An-chan...!”

Kobato's eyes were showing how overjoyed she was.

“I-Is it really okay?”

Yozora asked me, fidgeting.

“Well, since it's only one night it isn't too much of an issue. You're also not my but Kobato's guest. It would be rude to throw you out after all.”

“I see... Even though you're like this, you're still pretty tolerant. It seems you stayed at Meat's house too....”

To Yozora, who was muttering in a small voice, I did not reply, ‘What was that?’.



After Yozora had dried her hair, everything was set for going to bed.

Since Kobato said it would be okay for them to share a bed, there hadn't been a need to bring out a futon for Yozora either.

“Yozora, can I ask you one thing before you go to sleep?”

I said to Yozora who was following Kobato to her room.

“Kobato, you go to your room first.”

Perhaps because she noticed we were going to have an important conversation, or maybe because she just wanted to sleep, Kobato just said, ‘Mhm...’, and obediently followed my order.

“...What is it, Kodaka?”

After Kobato was in her room, I opened my mouth.

“...I became friends with Rika.”

“...I know, I saw it myself after all.”

After a moment of hesitation, Yozora said that in an indifferent tone.

Following up was a laugh.

“...Now that I think about it, Rika was the person you most naturally talked with a lot in the Neighbor's Club... Rika also seemed to naturally be by your side pretty often as well...”

“Ah... Well, to be precise we didn't become friends ‘today’, rather we've already been friends for a long time.”

After a short pause, I continued:

“For me Rika was the person I got along with the most in the Neighbor's Club. But my time with you guys was also——”

“Stop it.”

Not with a strong shout like I had done in the past, but with a lonely voice, Yozora quietly said that.

“You aren't Taka anymore, are you?”

“Yeah...”

To the nodding me Yozora said:

“Then you and me... are no longer friends.”

Tears rose to Yozora's eyes as she declared that clearly and laughed.

“...I see.”

Hasegawa Kodaka and Mikadzuki Yozora weren't friends.

Even if one of them one-sidedly felt friendship, that didn't make them friends.

“Rika is really a good girl.”

Yozora said with a sigh.

“Bright and caring, having a smart head and being an inventor that is able to directly evaluate social situations... If you wanted to become friends with someone, of course you would choose her over someone who is gloomy, treacherous, and selfish on top of being utter trash. Anyone would do that.”

I couldn't say a single word to Yozora who was abusing herself while she laughed, all while being on the verge of tears.

“I also listened to the voicemail that she left. She told me that I only run, only blame others, only hate reality and didn't try to do a single thing for myself... What she says is so true that I didn't have a single thing to reply.”

“After she had said that she felt really down, you know? Still...”

While still wondering whether it'd be okay if it came from my mouth or not, I said:

“‘If you hate it that much, then don't run for once, will you...?’, is what she was trying to say. What she feels about you is——”

“Haha”

Yozora let a dry laugh slip in order to interrupt what I was going to say.

“Yozora?”

A crooked smile found its way on Yozora's face.

“Taking pity on a crappy loser of an insect like me... I guess nothing less is to be expected from such great normals with friends and this boundless kindness.”

“You...!”

It was such a demeaning way to put it, that I felt sad before I felt resentful.

It seemed whether I wanted it or not, I was forced to realize that the Sora I once knew was no longer here after all.

“Is that all you wanted to say?”, Yozora said.

I shook my head in denial.

In reality, from here on out was the real deal.

“After going down from the roof, I went to give Sena an answer to her confession.”

Yozora’s eyes stiffened.

“S-So what was your answer to Meat’s confession?”

“My answer was that I love her.”

I doubted a lot whether I should have said that or not.

However, she would have most inevitably heard it once she had come to the Neighbors Club again. I thought it would be better for her to hear it from my mouth.

Yozora’s expression didn’t change.

After a small silence.

“I see.”

Yozora muttered in an emotionless voice.

After that, I tried to explain it like I did to Kobato at dinner. That I loved Sena but had no intention of going out with her, but Yozora was totally absent-minded and distant.

“...So Kodaka... That girl... He loves Kashiwazaki Sena, huh...?”

I said, ‘Yeah...’, to Yozora who was looking imploringly at me for confirmation while I nodded slightly.

“I see...”

Yozora said with a sigh.

She neither flipped into rage, talked badly about me, Sena or Rika, neither even grieved or weeped, only relying on her cheek’s muscles, she put on a frail momentary smile.

“Haha... Everything’s gone...”

Chapter 5: Bento

The next morning.

I prepared the breakfast for three, which we proceeded to eat.

Yozora seemed to be fine – at least on the outside – today. She praised my food saying, ‘You really are good at cooking after all...’, and requested a seconds on rice and a third share of miso soup. She even ate the sausages, egg omelette, and fried chicken I had prepared for the lunch bento.

It seemed she was hungry as all she had eaten yesterday were the pasta and sweets that she had to share with Kobato. I wasn’t complaining though, I felt relieved that she still had an appetite.

When we asked her about school she said, ‘I’m not going today.’. I therefore contacted the school to inform them of her absence, gave her a spare key to the house, and went out.

“Well, if you ever feel like going back home, then do as you please. Don’t forget to lock up when you leave, you can just give me the key tomorrow at school.”

“Yeah...”

“Kukuku... We are going but we shall return, my knight.”

“Yeah, you should get going Sumeragi... Kodaka too.”

I left the house with Kobato after we had been seen off by Yozora.

It felt strange to say the least...

Incidentally, when I asked Yozora what I should tell the others at the Neighbors’ club about this...

“Give it to them straight, I don’t really mind.”

“‘Straight’, you say... So I should tell them that after you gave up on going on a journey, you went to a park where you sat there all depressed until Kobato found you and brought you to my house where you’re now staying at... Is that really what you want me to tell them?”

“...Yeah.”

She answered with a nod while blushing.

“A new page was written in my dark history... That’s all there is to it. Let them laugh at this worthless, ugly, pitiful piece of shit...”

“No, they won’t laugh...”

Anyway, while I was on the bus that drove to the academy, I sent a text message to Sena, Yukimura, and Rika telling them about Yozora's current situation.

Title: About Yozora

Message body: I found her yesterday. Seems she gave up on going on a journey, so don't worry.

While I was on the bus, I wracked my brain over and over again about how I should phrase the mail. So I wrote it, then erased it again, and so on, which is why it turned out to be quite simple in the end...

From Sena came: 'As expected, it turned out just the way I said, didn't it? (—)☆'

Yukimura replied: 'Congratulations Aniki, nothing less to be expected.'

Rika answered: 'details@lb[1].'



And thus I went to the rikatory[2] at lunchbreak.

Rika (who was wearing the usual lab coat above her uniform and had let her hair down) and me facing each other.

——Yesterday on the way back.

As Rika seemed to be fidgeting left and right as she went, 'Umm... If it sits well with you, would you like to eat lunch with Rika tomorrow?', and invited me to lunch.

"Lunch?"

"Yes... We are f-friends after all.

"...!"

I simply stood there, bewildered by her words.

“...Umm, Rika can see the courtyard from the laboratory and... every day during lunch break she sees people eating their meals in the courtyard... and so eating lunch with a friend became something Rika always admired and wanted to do...”

“E-Eating lunch with a friend...?!”

Ahh... Such a cute request...

An act that is so normal for the vast majority of students... For us it is something we've never been able to relate to.

“I-If it isn't possible then it's fine—”

“It's A-OK! Let's eat that lunch together!”

Rika's shyly inviting me to lunch and I'm answering before she can even finish, even though it's just a promise to eat together.

“‘I'm answering before she can even finish, even though it's just a promise to eat together.’, Rika bets that was what you were thinking as you made that face; Rika is slightly annoyed thanks to that, but... Anyway, it's a promise, senpai.”

So that was that.

As this was going to be the first ‘lunch with a friend’ for me since I had come to this school, I made sure to wake up extra early and put quite an effort into making the bento for this day.

I wrote a mail to Yukimura telling her that the usual bread and delinquent manga wasn't necessary for today.

After Kobato and Yozora went to sleep, I had to stay up to do my homework. I had been sleepy throughout classes, waking up this day had taken its toll on me – but it didn't matter because today was special. Bread or rice balls from a convenience store wouldn't cut it.

As the fourth period ended and lunch break started, I headed out to the rikatory.

As I slightly opened the door to the lab, I noticed Rika spinning around the desk with her chair in annoyance. I stood there observing the situation for a while until I got caught.

I went inside the lab and took a seat.

“Well, shall we eat?”, I said strangely nervously, while stretching my hand to the bento laid on the table.

“Y-Yes, we shall.”

She replied in a way as nervous as mine.

The lunch in front of Rika contained a calorie friend[3] of the block type (fruit flavor), about ten small bags of supplements, a bag of solidified glucose, and a bottle of pepper nectar.

“...Is that really your lunch ?”

“Yes, it is.”

She said, seemingly not feeling that there could be anything wrong with the way I had said that.

“...Is all of this a set up to a joke for a character you made up?”

“No, it isn’t... These are quite handy. If Rika orders two months worth, she doesn’t even need to go out anymore.”

A hardcore shut-in right from start.

“Didn’t you eat all those tasty stuff like curry and deep-fried tofu when we go to the sea or the amusement park? Putting aside that you put tabasco in it like an idiot... don’t you usually eat proper food like that?”

“Rika likes spicy food, but if she were to eat it all the time, her stomach would go crazy. Rika usually pays attention to her health properly.”

She said a little proudly.

It’s true that eating spicy food all the time can result in that, but it was hard to believe that eating supplements and calorie blocks all the time was healthier than that.

Still being unsatisfied, I took off the lid of my bento box.

Eggs and chicken with two-colored rice, special fried chicken, sausages that had been cut into octopus shapes, egg omelette, a potato salad with broccoli, potatoes and carrots, mini tomatoes, apples cut into rabbits, and an orange.

Not only did I pay attention to the nutritional balance and taste, but also to the appearance.

“Did you make all that, Kodaka-senpai?”

“You bet.”

“Your woman-power is quite high, Rika understands... Making rabbits, octopuses, and whatnot...”

“I’ve always been making them for Kobato after all... I ended up doing it for myself as well as a habit.”

“Rather than woman-power, it’s closer to being a mother, Rika thinks.”

“It doesn’t make me happy either way. Now that I think about it, you are pretty good with handiwork, shouldn’t something like this be easy for you, if you put your mind to it?”

“A kitchen knife is too big and heavy for Rika... If it’s a laser scalpel though, not even mentioning making an octopus, Rika would be able to make the great Dagon-sama[4].”

I had also told her something like this before, ‘When you cook, you tend to throw strange things in and make the whole thing explode, or it ends up tasting like medicine.’, she are a mad scientist to the root after all.

“I don’t really want to eat a sausage that looks like an evil god.”

Smiling wryly, I grabbed the sausage with my chopsticks.

Rika looked at it with somewhat desiring eyes.

“...Do you want some? Of the octopus.”

“Yes. Rika would like it, senpai’s tentacle.”

“Don’t put it in such a disgusting way... Here.”

Since she didn’t have any chopsticks, I held the sausage up to her mouth.

“I-Itadakimasu.”

After showing momentary hesitation, she ate the sausage.

“It’s delicious. This has been the first time for Rika to eat an octopus sausage since she was born.”

Rika, being happy to the extent of exaggerating a bit, laughed.

Even though it was just an octopus, the fact that it made her so happy, made me happy as well.

“Do you want some more?”

“Yeah.”

I fed her another octopus sausage.

“Senpai’s tentacle is filling Rika’s mouth, th-thatsh amashing!”

“Shut up and eat.”

“...Nnn...Hamu...Han...Sh-Shenpai’s big wiener is inside of Rika...”



“You’re deliberately making this sound lewd, aren’t you?! Or rather, you really like those dirty jokes as always, huh...”

“Of course Rika does. If you take dirty jokes away from her, what do you suppose will be left then?!”

To the words Rika she said to me, I replied:

“There are many things...! L-Like friendship...”

“///[5]”

Her face turned red upon hearing my answer, I felt a little embarrassed too... ///

“Th-Thanks for the sausages! Rika will give you some zinc supplements as thanks.”

“Y-Yeah.”

As if trying to cover up the situation, Rika took out four pills and gave them to me.

I then took the supplements with tea, albeit a bit hesitantly.

“Hehe... This is the so-called bento exchange, isn’t it?”

She said, smiling happily.

And I said, feeling touched by those words:

“So this is it... So this is the legendary bento exchange...!”

“Since it’s a special occasion, wanna trade more?”

“You bet!”

“Give Rika some fried chicken then, please.”

I did as she said and fed her some fried chicken.

After one bite, her eyes rolled in bliss.

“Ohh— It tastes really crunchy and delicious!”

“I’m glad you like it. It took me quite a while to get the trick to frying it properly after all.”

“Then in return Rika will give you those iron supplements.”

“Yeah.”

I drank the supplements we traded.

“Rika would like to try some of the egg omelette now.”

“Yeah, I don’t mind.

“Ah! There’s Mentaiko[6] inside! Rika loves you, Mentaiko!”

Rika, who seemed to almost be childishly delighted, was very cute. So she loved Mentaiko... I would remember that.

“Ah, Rika will give you calcium supplements in return.”

“Well, calcium is important.”

“Please give me some of this potato salad next. A~~n.”

“Yeah, here, go for it .”

“Huh? It tastes sort of sweet...”

“Ah, I’m using condensed milk as the secret ingredient. I thought Maria and Kobato would be happier this way.”

“Rika understands... So you mix your white liquid in the food to entrap little girls with it... Here, senpai, vitamin B.”

“Don’t say such obscene things... Isn’t it about time for rice now?”

“Ah, yes. Rika will have the staple food as well, please. A~~n.

I fed her some of the colored rice and made fun of the calorie friend she gave me.

“...It’s the first time I’ve eaten something like this, but it really makes my throat dry.”

I couldn’t really say it was tasty.

“Have some glucose while you’re at it.”

“They sell stuff like this as well?”

“Rika uses it to refuel her brain. If she doesn’t do that, she ends up feeling kinda dull.”

“Because your brain works so fast? ...Sweet... Well, it’s sugar after all... Here eat some mini tomatoes too.”

“Thank you! Please have some magnesium too!”

.....And thus the process repeated itself, “Isn’t this somehow different?”, I only realized it as she was done with gulping down my bento.

“Fuuuh— It’s been a long time since Rika has been full like this.”

In contrast to the satisfied Rika, my stomach was far from being full.

“.....Is it okay if I make your own share for you tomorrow?”

“Ehh?! Is that really all right?”

“Yeah. Making a share for one more doesn’t really take that much effort after all.”

“No, but that’s... Rika still feels bad for making you do this. Doing something like making her a hand-made bento..... Rika would be too happy.”

To the unusually shy Rika, I became a little embarrassed, and while averting my gaze I said:

“W-We’re friends so there’s no need for you to be so reserved!”

I gave it my all to say that. It was much more embarrassing than I thought!

Like a blooming flower, a smile began floating on her face.

“Senpai...! Y-You’re right, Rika gladly accepts the offer!”

I tried to hide the fact that I had become somewhat fascinated by her smile and said:

“Ah, that’s right, weren’t we going to talk about Yozora?”

“Ah, now that you mention it, you did say that you found her, Rika believes.”

“Yeah. She was in my house.”

“Haaaa?! ”

I explained it to the very surprised Rika... I, however, left out the part where I saw Yozora naked in the bath.

“...This is really... Geez...”

When I told her about Yozora’s servile reaction to the voicemail Rika had left, she showed a terribly lonely face.

“...To tell you the truth, Rika likes Yozora-senpai quite a lot.”

She said suddenly.

“...Yah, I know. You were on really good terms with each other, both of you. You shared some interests too. Things like ‘Garusuku’ and the ‘Homoge Club’.”

“Yes... Rika thought of Yozora-senpai... as her friend, but it seems Yozora-senpai didn’t think of her as a friend, Rika guesses.”

“Who knows? Even I don’t know.”, I really didn’t, “She just told me yesterday that I’m not her friend either.”

I wondered what ‘friend’ meant to Yozora.

It feels a little different from when I had been afraid of deepening the relationship and therefore wouldn’t accept others as friends.

She sighed sadly, and as if changing, put on a bitter smile.

“Putting that aside though, Rika was really surprised at how Yozora-senpai captured the heart of Kobato-san like that.”

“Yeah... It was unexpected for me too.”

“Rika wonders what Sena-senpai’s reaction would be if she knew?”

“Umm— Anger? Or sadness... perhaps?”

“...Because of the confession thing, Rika is really unable to read Sena-senpai’s reactions now.”

She nodded earnestly.

As I was going to confess to Sena, I had told her, “Just like I thought. Seems I will need to go at her with full force.” But even though I had informed her of that intention of mine, I hadn’t told her what I would do exactly.

“You won’t ask what I’m going to do?”, I had asked her myself.

—No matter what you choose, if it is something senpai thought about and chose to do, Rika will accept it. Don't worry, Rika will come pick up your corpse later.

She had said and smiled.

Geez, there's a limit to how dependable one can get, you know?

“When Rika saw you getting on your knees, Kodaka-senpai, she honestly thought that you were going to get rejected without doubt.”

“Really?”

“Of course Rika did. Saying something like, ‘I won't go out with you but please go on like before’, your proposal wasn't the best either. Not to mention you did something as unsightly as prostrating yourself, that would be enough to cool down a century's worth of passion..... at least Rika thinks that most women would be like that.”

“...But Sena was different.”

“True... After the disillusionment of you running away from her confession, it seems like this prostration recovered her opinion of you somehow. Yesterday... If yesterday you had said something like, ‘Please go out with me.’ Rika thinks she would have most probably rejected you. ‘After screwing around all this time, what makes you say such selfish things?!’, is what Rika thinks she would have said.”

“...I guess one would be inclined to think that after all.”

I myself somewhat felt that it would have went that way.

“Sena-senpai, even in her simplicity she's also quite surprising, complex, and troublesome sometimes.”

“...Everybody's like that. That's what it means to be human after all.”

That Shiguma Rika was ranked first on that list of said human beings, I implicitly tried to get that nuance across.

A human that isn't complex doesn't exist.

Being someone's lover or friend is by no means a superficial relationship, the necessity of facing the hidden side of them is something I deeply believed in.

There would be times where I'd see the person I love in a bad state.

There would be other times where I ask myself, 'Why did I tell her?', and regret it.

The friend who gave me the courage to face this fear nodded while laughing and said, "That's right."

"...Yesterday Rika saw for the first time that Sena-senpai is really just a human being after all... If the person in question is a human being, it's possible to fight with them, as well as to become friends with them."

She said to herself in a strangely threatening voice.

Chapter 6: Perch

After school had ended, I decided that I would head to the student council room before I'd go to the Neighbor's club.

Yesterday, while I was helping Aoi, I ran into Yukimura and got called out by Rika. So I wanted to properly apologize for that and inform them that I wouldn't be able to show up daily anymore, since I'd be attending club activities again.

Finally, I arrived in front of the student council's room.

"It's meee."

I made sure to not forget to knock before I opened the door.

I once walked in without knocking and all four members of the student council (all girls by the way) were in the middle of getting ready for working outside, namely in the middle of changing their clothes. Since then I've been making sure to take proper precautions.

"Kodaka, eh? Aoi's naked right now, but that's not that important, come in."

From inside I could hear Hinata-san's voice—— the student council president, Hidaka Hinata.

"Wha— Hinata-san! What are you saying?! Kodaka-kun, I'm not really naked or anything! You can come in, it's fine!"

Aoi— hearing the student council treasurer Aoi Yusa's voice, I calmed down a bit and entered the student council room.

Inside, all four student council members had gathered.

The young lady, the one with a cheerful atmosphere and long black hair, was Hidaka Hinata.

The young lady, the one with reddish hair and a small stature, was Aoi Yusa.

"Geez—! Hinata-san, why do you tell such meaningless lies—?!"

"That's because Aoi's so interesting!"

Seeing the two-man comedy act, which Hinata-san tried to fuel with Aoi's involuntary help, Karin let out a sigh as if bored.

Karin—— Student council secretary Jinguuji Karin.

Class 2-4[1].

Her hair was long and black, her looks gave off an impression somewhere between beautiful and cute, and she rarely let any emotions show on her face.

A rosary with a cross permanently hung around her neck, on both of her wrists there were rosaries as well, not to mention the crosses decorating her hair.

Despite being a missionary school, there were very few christian students at St. Chronica (it seems that this didn't hold truth to only this school, but to other missionary schools as well), and being one of those few faithful christians, Karin also had the christian name 'Gabriella'.

The last one was Akane-san—— the vice president Ootomo Akane.

A beauty with a dignified appearance, her short hair gave me the impression that I had when Yozora had just cut her hair.

It seemed like she and Hinata-san were childhood friends from back in primary school.

She was similar to Hinata-san in being very helpful to others. Unlike Hinata-san, however, she wasn't as 'heavy' as her attitude was more refreshing, if you were to compare her with Hinata-san, who was popular with both sexes, Akane-san would be much more popular with the girls. The difference between 'anego' and 'onee-sama' one could say.

Hinata-san, who just couldn't sit still, also had her share of bureaucratic work done by Akane-san. Aoi and Karen also depended upon her more than Hinata-san herself. Even for me, if there was something I didn't understand about work, I'd often rely on Akane-san who explained things in a more logical manner, rather than Hinata-san who said things on whim.

"No, really, Hasegawa-kun. Thank you for your efforts as always."

I lowered my head in a quick bow to Akane-san, who was energetically raising her hand to greet me.

"Umm, I'm terribly sorry for having left in the middle of all the work yesterday."

"What are you saying? You don't need to worry about it", Hinata-san said laughingly while bearing an expression that showed that she truly wasn't worried about it at all..

"That's totally right. Not to mention that instead of Kodaka-kun, Yukkii helped us out.", Aoi said.

"Yukkii?"



She said to the puzzled me:

“Naturally, I’m talking about Kusunoki Yukimura.”

I still stood there, bewildered by what the smiling Aoi had just said.

When they had met the day before, Aoi had said on guard: ‘This is the person that tried to poison me!’ Yukimura, clearly hating Aoi, also had declared: ‘I don’t like this person at all.’ It had looked like they wouldn’t be able to get along at all.

“Now that Kodaka came as well, let’s start the student council for today, shall we?”

“Ehh?! E-Excuse me!”

Despite my reluctance, I was able to inform them about my will to prioritize my club activities and hence my inability to show up at the student council in a daily fashion.

“Muu[2]... Such a shame.”

Aoi’s eyes expressed her disappointment.

“Fumu... Club activities are important too, so I guess it can’t be helped.”

“With Hasegawa-kun here, we were really saved in a way, though.”

“.....”

Hinata-san and Akane-san said deplorably, Karin also looked as if she wanted to say something.

Suddenly, regret started to well up in me too.

Despite it being a place I had found in the course of an attempt to escape reality, during this one week, the student council had been the place I belonged to.

“But well, that doesn’t mean it’s the end! Whenever you deem my help necessary, feel free to call me. I’ll try to come help as much as I can!”

Seeing me talking so energetically about working, Hinata-san laughed wholeheartedly and said:

“Yeah, we’ll have you work hard in the future as well! You’re already something like a student council member, after all!”

“Hinata-san...!”

Hearing that made me incredibly happy.

However, after that...

“You will be with us on the trip the day after tomorrow, right?”

In reply to Hinata-san, who made a face as if she had said the most natural thing in the world, a question mark was floating above my head.

“...A trip? What are you talking about?”

“Eh? You didn’t know?”

Akane-san was surprised.

“Eh, ah, yes.”

When I nodded in reply, Akane-san moved her eyes to Hinata-san.

“...Hina, didn’t you inform Hasegawa-kun about it?”

“Mumu?”, Hinata-san said, tilting her head.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t remember telling him! I forgot! Fuhaha!”

“Seriously, you...”

Seeing Hinata-san, who was laughing heartily without a shred of malice, Akane-san let out a sigh and started her explanation.

“It’s sort of a traditional event here at the student council, you see. This weekend the student council will be doing a preliminary inspection of the inn that everyone will be staying at during the ski course.”

In this school the second-years got a ski course in January instead of a school trip.

Students were split into groups based on their ski abilities and took action based on what the instructor told them, Yozora had once said to me that this was kinder to loners than a normal school trip.

“Well, since we will be staying at the same inn as every year, there shouldn’t be any problems, so it’s basically a relaxing trip under the pretext of preliminary inspection.”

“I see..... So you’re inviting me?”

“Originally, it was planned that the five members of the student council would go, but our general affairs person unfortunately can’t make the trip. Thus we came to the conclusion to invite Hasegawa-kun instead. I was totally under the impression that Hina already told you about this, but... this idiot...”

Hinata-san laughed towards Akane-san, who was putting on a surrendered face, and said:

“Hahaha, sorry, Akane. And now that you’ve heard the situation, Kodaka, let’s go on a trip!”

“Are you an idiot? It’s the day after tomorrow, you know? Hasegawa-kun must have plans too!”

“Eh? Ah, no, I don’t really have anything planned.”

I was a little taken aback by Akane-san’s words, so I ended up denying it out of reflex.

‘It’s obvious that he has plans for the weekend.’ That was the first time someone had ever thought this for me naturally since I had come to this school.

“Then, by all means, let’s all go together!”

Aoi said, leaning forward.

“Ah, but I...”

“Don’t bother holding back, Kodaka. Or is it that you don’t want to go on a trip with us?”

“Th-That’s not true! I really wanna go!”

Hearing Hinata-san’s words, I got flustered and shook my head in denial.

“Then it’s all decided!”

“Sorry for all this, Kodaka-kun. But I’m glad.”, Akane-san said while smiling.

Karin was the only one indifferent towards the entire matter, and when I took a glance at her, she appeared to be typing some documents on her laptop.

And thus, it was decided that I would accompany the student council on their relaxation trip.

Even if it was a relationship I had formed while I was running away, it seemed like this relationship wouldn’t break so easily.

Chapter 7: Nickname

After leaving the student council behind, I headed to the club room.

Rika, Sena, Yukimura, and Maria were in the room. Upon my entrance, Maria approached me with hurried steps, while she had been eating away on some potato chips.,

“Listen, listen, Onii-chan! Today’s bentou was even more yummy than usual! Normally it tastes good too, but today it was even more amazing, somehow! How come?! Why?”

“It’s because I put in some extra effort today.”

I said to the cheerfully talking Maria and petted her head.

During my absence from the neighbor’s club, I had left the Maria-bentou-duty to Yukimura.

Everytime Yukimura had come to bring me the usual bread and delinquent manga at lunch break, I would’ve given her Maria’s bentou and ask her to give it to Maria.

This day, for the first time in quite a while, I had been able to give Maria the bentou myself, it had made her quite happy. And above all, it also seemed that the bentou itself had been well-received.

“Umm, how should I put this... I’m sorry for not showing up here these days.”

I said apologetic to Maria.

“It’s fine. Things like that happen.”

She replied in a carefree manner, while she was indulging into the sensation of her head being pat.

“I see. Maria is a really good kid.”

“Yep!”

She nodded, smiling brightly from ear to ear.

“By the way, Onii-chan, the poop vampire hasn’t come lately – that won’t do. She’s really hopeless—”

“Kobato said that she’ll come too, you know.”

“Really?!” Maria said happily. Followed by another even more passionate...

“Really?!”, from Sena, who was shifting her attention away from the galge almost the second she had heard what I said.

“Y-Yeah. When I said that I’d be going to the club again starting today, she said that she’d come as well.”

“Yippie—! I can finally flirt with Kobato-chan again!”

“...There never was a time where you did flirt with her before, you know...”

As usual, I made a jab at the cheering Sena.

“Uehehe♥, Kobato-chan, guhehe...” Sena put on a creepy smile, while whispering those ‘words of love’ towards the heroine of her game, the behavior of hers really was as she had promised the day before.

She was the ‘same old’ Kashiwazaki Sena.

I couldn’t tell from her current state whether she was simply acting or putting up with something.

“Thank you for all your hard work today, Aniki.”

Yukimura stepped forward and bowed, smiling softly.

“Yeah, I’m grateful to you too, Yukimura... Wha—?!”

Having delivered Maria’s bentous, having taken on my share of student council work yesterday, and on top of that staying by my side despite seeing my true self. While had been in the middle of delivering a word of thanks for all these things I recalled, I was suddenly confronted with something surprising.

When I came into the clubroom, I had been unable to see Yukimura’s body from the stomach downwards, as it was concealed by the table. Yukimura wasn’t wearing the butler uniform she usually wore around here, but the school uniform instead.

To top that off, it wasn’t a male uniform.

A blazer and... a skirt.

For the first time ever, I was seeing Yukimura dressed in the uniform of St. Chronica Academy.

“Yukimura, you— W-Why?! Why the girl’s uniform?!”

“I’m a damsel, as you know.”

Yukimura answered like it was nothing.

“T-That’s true, but...”

This is bad... She showed me her feminine appearance in a surprise attack and now my heart’s beating real fast.

...But this beating must be caused by the surprise, I think.

“Does it look strange?”

“No, if we’re talkin’ about strange things, the situation just now has been much weirder! But what happened to the butler’s uniform?”

“I got tired of this one.”

“You got tired of it?!”

“I didn’t really like it that much to begin with and yesterday Yusa-Yusa was pointing out that more womanly clothes would suit me better after all.”

“Yusa-Yusa?”

As I was getting puzzled from this new term:

“I’m speaking of Yusa Aoi.”

Yukimura answered without adding any honorifics.

“Umm, Yukimura-kun, can I ask why you’re calling her ‘Yusa-Yusa’?”

Rika asked with a timidly trembling voice in my stead.

“She’s a friend of mine after all.”

Yukimura answered in a manner as if it was nothing.

“Y-Your friend...?”, Rika said, unable to conceal how much she was trembling.

“Now that I think about it, Aoi called you ‘Yukki’ last time I talked to her too..... W-When did you guys get so friendly with each other?! ...Stupid me, it could’ve only happened yesterday after *that*...”

“Yes.” Yukimura nodded.

“We took an oath to level up of our femininity together.”

“L-Level up your femininity, you say...”

“Yes, we arranged plans to go buy clothes together soon.”

Somewhere in the whole thing Yukimura started to smile. *Uwaa, so cute. What’ll happen once this Yukimura levels up her femininity even more...?*

It’s true that Yukimura and Aoi met each other with enmity, but they both are very passionate about their beliefs. And even though it may be weird coming from me, but they both have this strange taste which leads to them labelling me as ‘cool’, so they might actually be able to get along if they talk to each other properly.

But still, it was just yesterday. Man...

“U-Umm, Yukimura-kun.”

Rika said faintly.

“What is it, Rika-dono?”

“You’re calling Yusa-senpai by the nickname ‘Yusa-Yusa’, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“...Yukimura-kun, you like to call your friends by nicknames, right?”

“Yes, they are friends after all.”

“How do you call Rika?”

Yukimura starred in puzzlement and said:

“...? Rika-dono is Rika-dono, no?”

“...So disappointing....”

Rika’s lips pouted in discontent.

“Don’t pout like that, will you?”

“...But... Even though both of us are in the Kouhai group... Muuu...”

Rika said, clearly ill-humored.

It seems that, seeing how both of them were first-years in the neighbor’s club, she felt some kind of relationship with Yukimura.

Now that I think of it, I’m recalling a situation similar to Rika’s right now.

She has the same expression Maria had when she had seen Kobato surrounded by her classmates during the school festival of that middle school.

“Yu-Yukimura-kun!”

Rika spoke up to Yukimura with a vigorous voice.

“Yes?”

Yukimura replied in her usual tone.

“Yukimura-kun, do you consider Rika... a f-friend...?”

“Ha?”

It was neither because of what she had said at the end being unclear, nor because of her pretending to not have heard it, like I used to – it wasn’t out of malice or sarcasm either. It was completely out of her inability to understand the words that had been said just now, so Yukimura had tilted her head with a, ‘Ha?’.

“Ah... Umm... It’s nothing...”

Murmuring that, Rika drooped her shoulders in disappointment.

“I shall speak to you about things based on true events... Rika thought of everyone in the neighbor’s club as friends, but the painful truth seemed to be that – with the exception of Kodaka-senpai – the others did not share this opinion... ‘Aren’t we all already friends?’— is what I had thought, but I was mistaken...”

Shiguma Rika—— She had a delicate relationship with Yozora and wasn’t thought of as a friend by Yukimura.

And regarding Sena in that matter, she didn't really care for Rika either.

They really are difficult... those so-called 'human relationships'. Well, that's a given though.



After that, the time in the club passed with a somewhat strange atmosphere.

I was doing my homework, Rika was on the computer, Yukimura was continuing her training of the 'Wicked Shadow Fist' back from her butler days, Sena was playing a game, Maria was alternating between mimicking Yukimura's training and roaming around me.

The same procedure as every day in the neighbor's club – everybody was doing their own thing.

An hour or so later, Sena turned away from her game and to me.

"Hey, Kodaka."

"Hm?"

"When's Kobato-chan coming?"

"Beats me..."

Now that she mentioned it, it had already gotten dark outside.

"I'll try mailing her."

And so I wrote to Kobato, [**When are you coming?**].

Three minutes later I received the reply from Kobato, [**Not coming today**]

"...Seems she won't be coming today, after all."

"EEHHH?!"

Her expectations betrayed, Sena raised a sad voice.

"I see... The poop vampire won't be coming today, huh..."

Sena aside, seeing Maria with that lonesome expression made my heart ache.

"Haa..." Sena sighed and quit the game.

“Sena?”

“That Kobato-chan won’t come took me down a peg. I’ll go home for today.”

After Sena left, the four of us just dallied around in the club, but before long a mail reached Yukimura’s cell.

“Aniki, I’ll be excusing myself for the today as well.”

“What’s up?”

“Today Yusa-Yusa finished her work early, so she invited me to go shopping with her.”

“She asked you now? That’s quite late.”

Rika said in a somewhat thorny tone.

“Yusa-Yusa is quite busy with student council work after all.”

“Yeah, yeah, the neighbors club is nothing but a bunch of idlers.”

Rika quickly replied to Yukimura as if pouting.



A little after Yukimura had left, the rest of us decided to leave too.

“Bye-bye, Onii-chan! See you tomorrow—!”

“Ye, look forward to your bentou.”

I bid farewell to Maria, who was waving her hands while she saw me off, and went through the school gate with Rika.

It was the time of day where people didn’t use the bus anymore, so Rika and I were the only ones who sat on the station bench.

Rika’s home was close to the school and she simply walked there, so right now she was just keeping me company until the bus would arrive.

“Are you still in a slump because of Yukimura and Aoi?”

“N-No, it’s not like I’m in a slump or anything. It’s just a shock for me, that’s all.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

I put my hand on Rika’s head.

“...Y-You have me, right?”

I said with without worries about possible consequences.

But you see... Seeing Rika – my friend – with the wish to make friends with other people right in front of my eyes – that made me feel kind of gloomy.

What is this feeling? ...Jealousy? Of Yukimura?!

I wish Yukimura only the best, I’m on pretty good terms with Aoi, and I really like that Rika who always thinks about the Neighbors club. But... I don’t know why, but I feel bad to see her feeling lonely because of Yukimura. It’s good that she sees Yukimura as her friend, but is just having me not enough for her? Those feelings of dismay were stirring within me and they made me quite sad.

What is this, I wonder...? I’m utterly confused about this feeling; it’s something I’ve never felt before.

“You’re right, Senpai.” Rika said laughingly.

“U-Ummm... Kodaka-senpai?”

“Yeah?”

“R-Rika suggests that we call each other by nicknames too!”

Rika said with a face blushed from embarrassment.

“N-Nicknames?”

“Yes! We’re friends after all, something like ‘Yusa-Yusa’, ‘Yukki’, ‘Meat’, ‘Poop Vampire’, or ‘Poop Saint’, let’s call each other by things like that too!”

“Y-You’re right! We’re friends after all!”

Calling each other by nicknames.

...Just like Sora and Taka once did.

“Then what are you going to call Rika?”

“Hmmm, let me think..... Perverted Fujoshi.”

“That’s slander! That’s what that is!”

Rika’s switch flipped the moment I said those words I came up with.

“No, really. Meat and poop vampire are both like that too, you know...”

“Please give me one where I can tell that you put your feelings in.”

“But telling me to decide on the spot is quite tough... Did you ever have a nickname before?”

“I didn’t. But I pretty much go by the handle name ‘Σ’. The greek letter.”

“‘Σ’, huh... The same pronunciation as your last name, so it makes kinda makes me want to call you by it...”

“Indeed, but it also feels like it could backfire and widen our distance.”

“To begin with, the name ‘Rika’ is already easy to pronounce, it only has two letters after all... Do you want something like ‘Yusa-Yusa’, so ‘Rika-Rika’?”

“R-Rika-Rika... Muuu...”

Seems like she didn’t like it. I can’t come up with anything particularly good either.

“Then let’s just go with something cliché, how about ‘Glasses’ or ‘Professor’?”

“That really smells cliché... If my goal were to enslave the world after I put on my glasses and labcoat, then those might be okay.”

“That’s quite the tough torturous task here. How about my nickname?”

“Kodaka-senpai’s nickname... The most clichéd option would be to just shorten your name.”

“Indeed...”

Taking a look at some acquaintances of mine, Akane-san does call Hinata-san ‘Hina’.

“It’s ‘Kodaka’, so... Going by the ring of it, it should be ‘Taka’, I think?”

“Ah, sorry, spare me from that one.”

Upon my request, Rika seemed confused.

“It was my nickname back in the day... When I was friends with Yozora.”

“...So that’s how it is.”

Hearing my story, Rika put on a complicated face and then abruptly returned to her bright attitude.

“How about something derived from your outward appearance then?! ‘Pudding’!”

“Let’s not play with people’s issues, okay...?”

“Then something from your innerself! ‘Loser Delinquent’!”

“That’s even worse slander!”

“Then how about one from your sexual preferences?”

“Sexual preferences?”

“‘Boob Guy’.”

“That nickname is way too much!”

“Then ‘Foot Guy’?”

“It’s not an issue of which body part!”

“Then which do you like the best out of boobs, ass, and feet?”

“Ass!”

“Do you like your boobs flat or big?”

“Big!”

“Die, ass maniac! You cow lover!”

After craftily dragging out of me what she wanted to know, Rika looked at me like one’d look at a piece of trash they were about to throw away.

“Hmmm... Let’s think about that again... If your first name is a no-go then how about your surname...?”

“Ah, now that you mention it, my father calls the chairman ‘Zaki’ too. He’s called Kashiwazaki after all.”

“...So out of Hasegawa we get... ‘Sega’.”

“Why did you choose those two syllables of all things?”

“‘Hase’, ‘Sega’, or ‘Gawa’... Out of all three that one’s the best.”

“That’s true, but... Let’s think about it a little bit longer, okay?”

“Then how about your favourite catchphrase?”

“Ah, right, in my old school there was a teacher who used to be called ‘Off The Record’ as well. It was due to his catchphrase being, ‘This is only off the record, okay?’.”

“What kind of teacher was that...?”

“There were many others too like, ‘Can’t Be Helped’, ‘Guts’, ‘Risky’, ‘Extremely’, ‘So-So’, and ‘Uh-Huh’.

“Were all those nicknames of teachers?!”

“Yeah.”

“That’s quite the pile of ‘em you have there.”

“I used to transfer schools a lot, so they piled up with the transfers.”

“Anything from the pile of student nicknames?”

I averted my eyes.

“...Okay, so let’s think about the catchphrase.”

“...Ye, right. If one were to speak of Kodaka-senpai’s catchphrase... There’s no other than—”

“‘What Was That Again?’. You just wanted to say that, didn’t you?!”

Rika’s sentence and my tsukkomi overlapped.

Rika laughed mischievously but after that she heaved a sigh.

“...Giving someone a nickname’s quite tough, I guess.”

“You’re right... But I guess it’s nothing you can think up on the spot.”

“That’s true, but...” Rika said poutingly.

“...I want to do more things with Kodaka-senpai that friends would do.”

Rika said, half shy and half happy.

“...Then...” I started to state a suggestion.

“How about calling my name without honorifics for the time being? Like how Yozora and Sena address me. Also, why don’t we stop with the honorific speech too, just speak casual to me.

“Without honorifics and on top of that speaking casual, huh... I already am saying it from time to time, but... You might be right with that.”

“I am, right?”

Rika’s face blushed.

“Th-Then let’s try it... I-I’ll say it, okay...? T-Trying to speak casually is making me nervous...”

“I-I see, give it your best.”

I’m getting somewhat nervous here myself.

Rika took a deep breath and said:

“.....Ko-Kodaka...”

Rika called my name with a voice so small, it could’ve been mistaken for a mosquito.

After speaking it out, her face became reddened up to her ears.

“Guhehe[1]...”

That’s bad, seems like I let out a weird laugh.

“Did you just laugh now...? Who would laugh at a time like this?!”

“No, but... It was somehow embarrassing.”

My face broke out into an incredible grin.

It was really embarrassing, but... It wasn't bad. No scratch that it felt good, too good.

“M-Maybe we should really give it up...”

“No, please continue with it. How do I put this... It's embarrassing, but it's good nonetheless.”

“R-Really...? Then when it's just the two of us, I'll try my best to say it...”

“Yeah... Good luck.”

The bus came the moment we were finished.

“Th-Then I'll see you tomorrow, Rika.”

“Ah, yes Koda... Umm, bye-bye— Kodaka.”

Being flustered by Rika's shy face, I hurried into the open bus door.

Chapter 8: Hero

When I came back home, I found Yozora with a knife in her hand standing in the kitchen.

“Gyah?!”

I reflexively screamed.

“Ah, Kodaka...”

Yozora stiffened up and put on a strange smile.

She was holding the knife with both her hands, her grip was a little shaky.

...So Yozora was standing there, shaking with a knife in her hands and a crooked smile.

If someone had asked me, I'd say it really fit her.

Needless to say that I was the one who had let out that scream earlier.

“Fu... I see you've come back...”



I stepped back a few and yelled at the approaching knife-holding Yozora:

“P-Please wait! Let’s stay calm and talk this out!”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Yozora gave me a strange look.

“No, I mean... Please don’t stab me...”

“Huh?! W-Why would you say something that disturbing?! Who’d stab you, you idiot...”

Seeing Yozora that flustered and placing the knife on the kitchen counter, I finally realized my misunderstanding.

I could see a chopping board on the kitchen table. And carrots had been chopped on it.

“Kukuku... You’ve returned quite early today, my kindred...”

“...What are you guys even doing?! And why are you still here, Yozora?”

“Su-Sumeragi said that I could stay another day, so I did.”

“Kukuku... That’s exactly how it is, my kindred.”

Yozora was wearing the black jersey that we had bought in Nagoya the other day, she must’ve went home to get it.

“...So? What exactly are you doing here?”

“Kukuku... We were making preparations for a mixture of the black magic nostrum...”

I put the bag of groceries on the table – potatoes, onions, and a pack of meat.

Seeing the carrots on the chopping board, I asked:

“...Are you making curry? Or is that meat stew?”

“Kukuku... To be able to see through this secret cocktail immediately, as expected of my kindred...” Kobato said.

“Yeah, it’s curry... As thanks for all the trouble you guys went through, I thought I’d make dinner or something.” Yozora answered in a whisper.

Kobato hadn’t been interested in cooking before, and Yozora had said at the sea that she couldn’t cook – I had my worries. But I was very happy on the inside nonetheless.

“Then it’d be alright if I left dinner to you guys?”

“...No.”

Yozora looked at my eager self and shook her head.

“Eh?”

“I thought if it’s just curry then I should be able to do it... but it seems like it’s impossible after all.”

Yozora said and took a glimpse at the kitchen knife.

“I can’t use knives properly. I can’t cook at all... Something that could make people happy... These filthy hands can’t do anything but hurt people...”

Kobato looked at Yozora with great admiration and sparkling eyes, saying ‘Kukuku... So cool...’. For some reason, Yozora was gazing at her palms with a distant look in the meantime, while murmuring something that I couldn’t really understand.

Seemed like cooking duty would fall onto me like always.

Well, that had saved me the bothersome task of going to buy ingredients again. So I guess it was alright...



I made curry and put the leftovers together to make some stir-fried vegetables, the three of us then sat at the dining table just like we had been in the today.

“Yozora, did you stay here the entire day?” I asked her.

“...Apart from when I went for a change of clothes and the shopping, yes.”

“What have you been doing all day?”

“Watching ‘Kurogane no Necromancer’.”

“Huh?”

While I was gazing at Yozora in amazement for her unexpected answer, Kobato laughed, clearly in a good mood.

“Kukuku... It was I who told her to watch it...”

“I’ve watched the whole first season and when I was about to get to the second half of second two, Sumeragi came back, so I went shopping.”

Skipping school to watch anime all day... What an awful lifestyle.

“...And? Was it interesting?”

“Yeah... it was.”

Yozora showed a heartfelt smile after her approval.

“Kukuku... The godly plan to make ‘KuroNecro’ the bible of the new age... Let’s watch the rest of it together after we’ve had dinner... Especially the last three episodes of season two. They’ve reached divine levels so you’d do well looking forward to them...”

“Fu... Then I guess we’ll watch it. You like the second season, Sumeragi?”

“Umu.” Kobato nodded.

“What about you, my knight?”

“As for me, I still prefer the season one, for now at least... I’ve found the start particularly good.”

“Hoo... That’s unexpected. Isn’t the start-off much less popular than other the parts?” I commented.

I hadn’t properly watched ‘KuroNecro’ myself, but thanks to Kobato’s influence I had some fair knowledge nonetheless.

With its dark setting and deep plot, the show was a hit even among a more mature audience. However, the first season, especially the very beginning, had mainly targeted primary schoolers as the audience and thus been a cliché good versus evil thing... The story was plain simple with some strong mahou shoujo feeling to it too... To put it badly, it had double standards.

“Kukuku... Guernica-chan was cute in season one so I liked that, but it really is unpopular with it being childish. I still liked it, but... Guernica-chan’s character was different first, so... I think it had its own merits...”

Kobato tried to follow up, still feeling a little perplexed.

Yozora put on a faint smile.

“Putting aside that I don’t really hate simple stories anyway... a heroic and kind protagonist who jumps into danger without a second thought just so that he can protect his friends and family... It’s just a rough story that simply results from Guernica’s personality not being too crafty then, but still, I like it. Justice always wins, evil’s always punished, great effort’s always rewarded, trust’s never betrayed, good intentions never backfire... I think it’s good that such a world exists... even if it’s just in anime.”

Yet in Yozora’s eyes and smile was nothing like hope, but resignation towards the fact that such a world didn’t really exist.

Someone like me, who had a strong history of bad luck, could only sympathize for her.

Justice doesn’t always win, evil doesn’t necessarily get punished. Hard work’s more ignored than rewarded and trust betrayed all too often. It’s natural to find good intentions wasted in this world.

“...When I was a kid, I used to really like the power rangers and magical girls, you know?”

“Indeed... I remember the two of us playing hero all the time back then.”

Hearing those nostalgic words from Yozora all of a sudden, I naturally found myself smiling as well.

“Now that you mention it, once when you tried to imitate one of those heroes’ secret move you jumped from real high and got yourself injured. Blood was dripping out of your thigh and stuff...”

Yozora turned red hearing me talk about this.

“D-Don’t bring up that stuff while we’re eating!”

“Kukuku... To think such a thing happened in the past... Memories of fresh blood... So cool...”

At that time Sora had been weeping badly and I myself was screaming, ‘He’ll die! Sora’s going to die!’. There hadn’t been anything cool about it back then.

I exchanged glances with Yozora and we both sighed.

A fleeting smile then found it’s way to Yozora’s face.

“...I admired heroes and magical girls, hoped badly that justice exists, I saw love and friendship as holy... Yet, how did it come to this...?”

I didn't reply.

Why can't this world become happy with courage and kindness alone?



After we had finished dinner, Yozora and Kobato watched the whole of 'KuroNecro's season two, and had a match at 'Magical Hyper Battle 3' afterwards.

Kobato had went all-out right off the bat when she had been playing with Maria the other day. This time she was even giving advice to Yozora: "Guernica-chan's a bit hard for beginners, so it'd be better you chose characters that are strong in close and ranged combat like Carol or Meru-chan..." On top of that, she even showed her the ropes herself: "When you want to throw the Gehenna Flames, you've got to do it like this... You press square and then throw them quickly from above, like this..."

Yozora was quick on the uptake and was soon able to have a match with Kobato on equal footing.

"Kukuku... Nine lives breaker—!"

"Fuhaha! It's the Aegis Barrier! You're good, Sumeragi!"

"Wha—?! To think my ultimate move was warded off...! How...?!"

"Fuu, I cancelled Ice Needle and could speed up the Aegis Barrier move then. Now it's my turn! Ultimate Spiral!"

"Ku... I guess that much is to be expected from my knight... But it's useless nonetheless...!"

"I-Impossible! You could defend against that?! You really are good, Sumeragi...!"

The two of them seemed to have immersed into their characters and the climax of the battle began to unfold.

They should just have a normal talk while they're fighting, is what I thought, but it seemed to be more comfortable for them that way, so I kept it to myself.

"Hoo, so that's 'Hell Blazer Buster: Cerberus Mode', with hydras and gryphons attacking in waves... It appeared in the eighth episode of season two, I think."

"OfuofuofuofUO...?!"



Kobato's eyes grew big from delight.

“To even be able to see through that attack... You're quite capable...”

“Since we've reproduced that scene this far, it'd be a waste to not go further! I'll take on your attack just like in the anime. Be prepared, it won't continue like there, though!”

“Bihihi, ahem, t-then let me teach you Meril-chan's secret command! By using it, you can guard against any super attack!”

She had only seen the anime once and yet Yozora's amazing memory helped her to keep up with details that only the show enthusiasts normally could keep up with. Naturally, this excited Kobato greatly.

The two continued their gaming marathon after they had a bath together and then took a bit of a break.

Seeing that the two of them had no intentions of stopping even though it was almost midnight, I said:

“Heeey, you two should get to bed already.”

“J-Just a bit more! That's a once in a lifetime chance to recreate the battle between Excalibur and Astaroth Howling from episode 11 of season 1, I'll go sleep as soon as it's done! “

I said in reply to Kobato's pleading, “Just ten more minutes, alright?” and sighed. I followed up with:

“Also... You two should come to the club again, you know?”

I said, knowing too well that this wasn't at all the duty of the guy who run first.

In the middle of mashing the buttons, Yozora and Kobato's hands stopped.

“Maria's feeling lonely because Kobato isn't coming these days.”

I didn't dare to mention Sena here.

“...!”

Totally surprised, Kobato sucked in a bunch of air and had hesitation written all over her face for a while.

“...Kukuku... Foolish servant of god, it seems like she’s completely let her guard down... It’s about time I broke through this peace of hers...”

“Yeah, break through it.”

Kobato then looked at Yozora and slightly tugged her jersey:

“...G-Go together?”

Yozora, seemingly embarrassed, alternated between looking at my face and Kobato’s. Then she loitered her gaze into no particular direction and murmured:

“...W-Well... if you say so, Sumeragi, then I guess I could liberate myself from this Tartarus Prison and return to the present world once again... I’m Sumeragi’s knight after all...”

Kobato’s face brightened upon hearing Yozora’s words, who had only managed to say them with bright red cheeks.

I was quite relieved as well.

It looked like we’d all be able to see the original staff of the neighbor’s club again at last.

Chapter 9: The Honor of the Dejected Loser

The next day, after school.

Inside the room of the Neighbor's Club the same five people as yesterday were present, Rika, Sena, Yukimura, Maria, and I.

“Kodaka? Kobato-chan's coming today for sure, right?”

Sena said somewhat irritated. She wasn't even playing any games at the moment. All she did was waiting for Kobato while fidgeting around and drinking coffee.

“She's coming... probably. She's agreed again in a mail from earlier.”

By the way, today Yozora said, ‘I'll be watching the third season of ‘KuroNecro’.’, so she had been absent from school. But she mentioned to also show up in the club room later.

With the exception of Sena, everyone passed time by doing their usual thing and awaited *that* time.

Like that, everyone was waiting for a while – and then the door finally opened.

The person who entered was – Kobato.

“Kobato-chan!”

Sena's face flared up with enthusiasm.

However, immediately after, her eyes opened wide in a flash.

The one holding Kobato's hand, Mikadzuki Yozora, entered the clubroom in silence with a terribly unpleasant, stern expression on her face.

Closing the door, Yozora then just idly stood there in front of us.

Everyone remained silent while waiting for Yozora to make the first move.

With her usual sulken expression and her cheeks a little blushed, she murmured:

“...It's embarrassing, but I'm back.”

After a few seconds of general bewilderment about how to react, the first one to open her mouth was Sena.

“Ahahaha! It really is embarrassing! What was with that ‘I’m going on a journey’ stuff? Ba~ka Ba~ka! Hahaha!”

Whether it was concern or what she truly thought (the latter’s more likely) aside, Yozora let out a ‘grrr’ and her face stiffened at Sena, who was ridiculing and bursting into laughter at her without mercy.

“W-Who’s fault do you think that is...”

“Huh? Fault? You’re the one who intentionally put herself into that dejected state, right?”

“Gu...”

Yozora was at a loss and had nothing to come back with.

Sena let out a ‘hmp’ and showed Yozora a kind smile,

“But, you know, I’m glad that you didn’t go on a journey for real.”

Yozora reacted with a shocked face.

Sena’s expression changed back to sneer once again and she continued:

“I mean, if you had gone on a journey and then died on the side of a road or something, I wouldn’t have felt bad about it *at all*, but it’d dampen my mood a bit, you know?! It’d also greatly inconvenience my family, we’re running this academy! Plus, your worthlessness comes in handy every now and then!”

“Ugugu...”

Yozora’s left hand, the one which wasn’t holding Kobato’s, started to shake tremendously and an expression of anger appeared on her face.

“And? What did you end up doing after all after sending that text? Although it seems you were absent from school. At any rate, I bet you probably just shut yourself in.”

“...I was at Hasegawa’s house.”

“Eh?”

Sena stared blankly upon hearing Yozora's reply.

Yozora gave Sena a cold, indifferent look, she seemed to try and provoke her in a way.

"After all that, I've been staying over at Kodaka and Sumeragi's house for two days. I ate Kodaka's homemade dinner and breakfast with them, watched anime BDs that Sumeragi lent me, ate lunch that Kodaka made for me, ate dinner with them, ate the lunch Kodaka cooked for me, went to meet Sumeragi at her middle school, and now, we came to the Neighbor's club together."

"S-Sume...?"

On Sena's face a horde of question marks appeared, and then:

"AHH!"

Pointing at the joined hands of Yozora and Kobato, she raised her voice so much that she was almost screaming.

"Hiie!"

Kobato got frightened and hid behind Yozora.

"C-C-Come to think of it, you've come in here with Kobato, didn't you?! No wait, what do you mean you stayed over at Kodaka's?!"

"It's exactly how it sounds." Yozora said.

"R-Really? Kodaka..."

Sena turned her face to me.

"Eh, yeah..."

"Why didn't you tell me?!"

"That's, I mean, you didn't ask about Yozora, so I didn't really get a chance to..."

"Don't you think it would've been okay to just tell me that she's safe?!"

Sena didn't notice that Yozora's eyes were fluttering about in embarrassment when she heard that.

"But why did you let Yozora stay at your house?! You said you love me, right?!"

My face started to heat up too when she flat out said such a thing.

“I-It was late at night so it would’ve been bad to just turn her down. And in the first place, she was Kobato’s guest, not mine...”

“It’s just as Kodaka says. *You* have no reason to get angry, right? Besides, Kodaka’s already stayed over at *your* house, right?”

“T-That’s, um... T-That doesn’t count! Kodaka was just keeping my family company then, so...”

Although Sena was defiant, she had realized her disadvantage here, so there wasn’t any real decisiveness in her words.

“W-Well, now that I think about it, isn’t staying over at someone’s house something normal?! You’re acting as if it’s not normal at all! It’s just staying over at someone’s so you shouldn’t be boasting!”

“Uu...”

This time Yozora groaned in frustration.

Seeing that reaction, Sena grinned broadly.

“W-Well, when Kodaka was staying over at *my* house, he saw me completely naked! It was a total disaster!”

Her face was red, but Sena seemed to be somewhat proud.

“We really ran into each other naked while he was staying over! Just what kind of rom-com is this?! Kodaka’s just hopeless! Plain lewd!”

“‘Into each other naked’, my ass! I’ll have you know that I was properly clothed at the time! Moreover, you were 100% to blame for that! You weren’t in the bath yet you’re running around stark naked!”

I couldn’t bear it anymore so I protested.

And then Yozora stepped on an even bigger landmine.

“H-HE SAW ME NAKED TOO!”

“Eh?!”, “Eh...?!”, “Eh...”

It wasn’t just Sena, Rika and Yukimura’s faces were stunned in astonishment too, they didn’t know about it after all.

“W-What do you mean by that?!”

“W-When I was taking a shower at Kodaka’s house, he got into the bath without warning all of a sudden! H-He really is hopeless, that Kodaka! He’s such a shameless pudding!”

“I didn’t think I’d find *you* in there!”

To the desperately shouting Yozora, I basically shouted that explanation back.

“H-He also saw my breasts at the training camp!”

“Tsk... That time as well...! I made something unnecessary happen there...!”

Yozora groaned in frustration for some reason .

“Ahahaha! I’ve been in the bath with Onii-chan too!”

Maria entered the battle.

“I had the honor to wash Aniki’s back. And I’ve changed while standing next to Aniki.”

Even Yukimura!

Crap, she remembered about the stuff that happened at the pool and hot springs!

“There was the occasion where Aniki helped me out of my maid uniform too.”

“A-At that time I thought you were a boy!”

“For me, even though it’s come to light that I’m a woman, I wouldn’t mind if Aniki saw everything of me.”

“E-Even so, please don’t just say such bold things!”

My head was going crazy at the outrageous things Yukimura with her cheeks blushing.

“Kukuku...Up until last year I, too, entered the bath together with An-chan...”

Kobato started to burn up with a strange sense of rivalry.

“But, but I’m the last who bathed with him, okay?!”

“I got in with An-chan many, many, many more times! A thousand quazillion more than you!”

“Quality over quantity, ha! I’ve seen Onii-chan’s peepee!”

“Kukuku, you foolish servant of god. I’ve grown tired of looking at An-chan’s peepee and such. I’ve pulled and played with it too!”

“That’s no fair that it’s just you! I also want to pull and play with Onii-chan’s peepee!”

I’d really like this to stop.

“...This has turned into a somewhat weird battle, hasn’t it?”

Rika, the only one among all of them whose naked body I hadn’t seen, murmured with a sigh.

“Rika, can’t you say something about-”

I turned my head to ask Rika to help out and noticed a completely dissatisfied look:

“...Come to think of it, didn’t you also see all of the student council members naked?”

“”Wha...?!””

Sena and Yozora were at a loss for words.

“I’ve heard it from Yusa-Yusa too. It seems like all the members were taking off their clothes and Aniki came in with exquisite timing. As expected of Aniki... a true brute.”

“Onii-chan saw the old hag naked too! When it happened she said she was fine afterwards, but she turned totally red like a tako-san[1], hahaha!”

Maria revealed an additional piece of information simple-mindedly.

“...This godfather of nudity.”

Rika spat out in annoyance.

“You’re making it sound like I wanted to see all of them naked! ...Really, I’ve had just about enough of naked girl’s bodies...”

““Die!””

Sena and Rika both spurned me at the same time.

“...I was...”

Just then, Yozora opened her mouth. I didn’t get though why she was hanging her head in shame.

“I-I was...”

“Yozora?”, “What’s wrong, Yozora...?”

Is there still more? The only time I've seen Yozora naked should've been the day before yesterday... Could it be that it's something that happened when we were kids?

Everyone was paying close attention to her and...

“...B-But... he s-saw me... while... masturbating...”

In front of that outrageous words Yozora's fragile voice just confessed, the atmosphere in the clubroom froze over.

“Wha...?!”, “Haa?!”, “Eh?!”, “Hawa...”, “///”

“Hey, hey, Onii-chan, what's ma-stu-er-bay-ting?”

“Something you're too young for!”

To the only person present who didn't know that word, Maria, I quickly tried to distract, but...

“Is it something lewd?! I've heard somethin' like that from the old hag before. She also told me that I was too young for that and tried to avoid the question! So Yozora was doing that lewd ma-stu-er-bay-ting in Onii-chan's bathroom!”

“Uu...”

Hearing Maria state that so innocently, Yozora was on the verge of tears and her face bright red, and yet, she continued:

“T-That's right! It's exactly that...! ...W-When I was in the Kodaka's shower... I-I was... a-amusing myself... And exactly then Kodaka came in... H-HOW'S THAT?!”

To the desperately shouting Yozora...

““H-How's that'? Even if you say that...” Sena said, embarrassed.

“I-Is that so...” Rika replied.

“...Po.” was Yukimura's reaction.

Everyone was shocked and bright red.

And so was I.

So then Yozora was... I see... Thought it could be something like that at the time, but... I figured she'd never dare to...

“Just what do you think you’re doing in other peoples’ bathrooms...”

“S-Shut up!”

It was only natural that she’d already noticed the atmosphere getting frozen, but even so she started speaking up again with a strong voice.

“I’m sure you’re all totally surprised about my secret, but it’s an absolutely normal biological act to do. And despite the way I look, it’s not like I’m not somewhat interested into sexual matters a bit!”

“Then Yozora-senpai’s been exposed as a closet pervert, though...”

Ignoring Rika’s retort, Yozora shouted:

“L-Listen up, Meat!”

“Eh?! W-What is it?”

“Rika too! Yukimura as well!”

“Yes?!”, “Hm?”

“Kodaka too!”

“Ofu?! ”

“I’m finished! I’ve fallen to the lowest point! Rock bottom!”

‘Don’t say something like that about yourself’, is what I thought, but nothing came out of my mouth.

“Well, I can’t really object to that...” Sena said.

“That’s right! Right now, I’m a piece of poop, lower than even a miserable maggot floating on the bottom of some sludge!”

“You didn’t need to go that far...” Rika said with an expression of pity on her face.

“Poop (° ▽ °)!”

For some reason Maria reacted gleefully.

“The sole superiority I had by having a so-called childhood friend, gone. My position as friend, gone. I’ve nothing likeable about me for men, I was picked up and treated like a pet by a little sister. My hair was burned off. I threw up all over the place. My plagiarism was caught. And finally I was stared at all over the place in my birthday suit while I indulged in a shameless act!”

“Wait, I didn’t stare at you all over the place, you know?!”

Although I knew I’d be ignored, I still retorted. Just in case.

“I-In other words…”

Bright red all the way up to her ears, teary-eyed, and with a little bit of mucus running down her nose, she said:

“I’m done! I’ve nothing more I could lose!”

Seemingly not minding the unthinkable deplorable things she was saying, Yozora put all her strength into her voice and shouted, it was so awe-inspiring that one almost couldn’t see her appearance.



Chapter 10: The Neighbors Club's Saga

After Yozora-san had said that she had nothing more to lose, she sat down in front of the TV with Kobato and started playing the game from last night, 'KuroNecro', with Maria jumping in on it as well.

Sena begged Kobato too, 'Let me join too! I've been practicing that game quite a lot, you know!'. But she was shot down by Kobato's 'NO!'. However, she didn't give up and kept at it until she was finally allowed to play a round, and in that fight she attacked Kobato with an incredibly complex move and forced her into a stunlock that she couldn't escape until she finally died. Thus, Sena gained a perfect victory.

Against Yozora, who had challenged her to avenge Kobato, she used a different stunlock combo than before and achieved another total victory.

Sena replied to Yozora's more shocked than angry, 'You know nothing of combat aesthetics, you damn beast...':

"Fufun, the dejected loser should stay quiet! How was that Kobato-chan, I'm strong, right?! That's why you should go with me rather than Yozora, and—"

"...It'd be borin' if I played with ya."

"(´・ω・`)"

Completely ruining Kobato's mood, Sena was kicked out.

"Uu~ My Kobato-chan got NTR'd by Yozora..."

"Kobato was never yours to begin with."

I faithfully retorted to the teary-eyed and grieving Sena.

In that kind of mood, everyone passed the time with all kinds of things for a while.

"H-Hey!"

Rika, who was reading a book, broke the ice after Yozora and Kobato had finished who knew how many battles.

"It's been quite a while since all of us have been here, so why don't we do something together?"

"That's a great idea! Agreed, agreed!"

As she had been banished from the game, Sena was the first to approve.

“Hmph... Well, I don't mind either, but what do you have in mind?”

In response to Yozora's question, Rika said:

“I was thinking about playing that ‘Romancing Saga’ that we’ve been playing before. I just got my hands on the master edition yesterday. What do you think?”

Romancing Saga – Developed by a company located in the Saga Prefecture. A fantasy RPG that used a head mounted display which would let you immerse in a realistic and enjoyable adventure.

About five months ago, the Neighbors Club had played the experimental version of it that Rika had helped with to develop.

Back at that time, Rika had stated in an enthusiastic manner, ‘I happen to have just the perfect game.’ and brought it out. But in truth, she had prepared all of the character models we had used beforehand and so we had all played through somewhat of a sneakpeak of it.

With Rika, who had become my friend, and Yozora, the returnee, this game was the perfect choice for something like a new start for the Neighbors Club.

“I approve. That game was pretty amazing, if I remember it right.”

“RomaSaga... So the finished version is finally here, I see. Understood, bring it on.”

Yukimura muttered for some reason with a tense expression.

Kobato, who hadn't been a member at the time, said, ‘Saga...?’ with a somewhat curious expression on her face.

“If there's anything you don't understand, I'll teach you, okay, Kobato-chan?! I'll protect you from all the scary monsters!”

In response to Sena, who bent over in excitement, Kobato got frightened and moved closer to Yozora.

“There's nothing to worry about. I'll make sure to protect Sumeragi.”

“...! Yep!”

Kobato blushed in front of Yozora after she had said that smooth and cool line, and then, seemingly happy, nodded her head, while Sena was stuck with a, ‘Uuh~ Why is it always Yozora...’ and got teary-eyed.



Rika and I brought out the head mounted display ‘Virtual Boy’, that hadn’t seen daylight in quite a while, and the game from the science room and connected it to the computer, after which everyone donned their headgear.

Similar to when we had played back then, right after the Largehard company’s logo, beautiful mountains, rivers, and meadows appeared in front of our eyes.

As we listened to the impressive BGM from the headphones, a familiar narration was heard.

Saga – There Lies the Final Frontier.

“What the heck?!”

Kobato was seeing this opening for the first time and made a retort similar to mine back on that day.

“...I guess the narration is still like that.”

“The appearance of the world and other things shouldn’t have changed from the beta version. I’ll just skip over the opening then.”

Rika said, interrupted the opening, and advanced to the character selection screen.

A mirror appeared in front of my eyes, and my figure was reflected off of it.

Standing in that pitch black space was the spitting image of me as a CG model. Once again, I was really shown how much Rika had outdone herself and all the troubles she must have went through for this... Although I believe that she had somehow managed to sneak pictures of us to do all that.

“The character models are the same as last time. I’ve also prepared Kobato-san’s already. There shouldn’t be any problems if you go ahead and push the confirm button as-is, but there are also functions there to adjust your height and body size, so if you’ve grown taller or your breasts have gotten larger in these past 5 months please change the settings on them.”

So it even has functions like that...

Now that I think about it, the last time my height measure was before I transferred into this academy, so I’m kind of curious what it is right now. It’d be nice if I’d grown...

In any case, I left it as-is and pushed the confirm button to move onto the job selection screen.

The list of jobs were displayed in rows across the screen. There were about a hundred different ones to choose from, and I was completely at a loss as to what to choose.

“What jobs are you guys going to pick?”

The other members didn't seem to be having any trouble choosing their classes, so I asked them that.

“I chose the paladin.” Sena said, being the first to answer. If I was asked though I'd say that she didn't 'choose' the paladin, but rather that she had settled with something like the paladin from the very start.

“I'm going to be a dark knight.”

“Kukuku... Very well, I think I shall ascend the throne of the dark princess.”

“Rika will be going monk. We didn't have a healer last time and it caused us a lot of problems.”

Yozora, Kobato, and Rika answered.

“I shall choose the dancer.”

“Dancer?!”

At the unexpected answer all the other members and I let out a gasp of surprise.

“You're not going samurai?”

“That's correct.”

“...Well, we already have two melee jobs, so a support class would be better perhaps.”

Rika said.

And last of all, Maria raised her voice.

“I'm goin' wizard, ahahaha!”

“Eh...”

The last time we played, I had chosen the wizard myself, but it was a useless class that didn't learn a single helpful skill.

Speaking of which, the last time Maria had fallen asleep right after she put on the virtual boy, so she basically hadn't participated at all.

“Ahahaha! I’m a genius so I’ll be able to do some amazin’ wizardry!”

“...Maria, you’ve already chosen then?”

“Yep! Let’s do our best together Onii-chan!”

Seeing Maria so innocently happy, I couldn’t help but feel warm myself.

“Let’s see then... I think I’ll be choosing the sage class then.”

Thinking that it’d be better to choose a class capable of using magic, I decided to choose the sage.

After I finished choosing my class, the mirror in front of me spread out over the entire screen and transformed into a huge steppe.

And then I could see the figures of the other six.

Sena, the paladin, was wearing an armor that could only be described as fitting her image completely – painted in white. It was a great fit with her blond hair and blue eyes and looked really cool, but it had very little exposure and that was – at least for me – quite a shame.

Yozora was wearing a black armor befitting of her dark knight class as well. It exposed her thighs and arms a bit more than Sena’s.

“Uuuu~ An-chan...”

Seeing Kobato’s figure, I opened my eyes wide.

Kobato’s class choice was... dark princess, I believe?

...However, what engulfed her body was this so-called dark pudding, something that looked like coffee jelly. Her face, arms, and legs could be seen creeping out of it.

“Where did the dark pud..... princess go...”

“It looks like you ended up choosing another class like the rose girl and wizard, that the developers put in there for teh lulz. Just like the rose girl, it’s a mid-ranged attacker and it’s defensive capabilities are the highest among the classes. It’s attack power is high as well, so I wouldn’t say it was a bad choice.”

“I-It’s alright, Kobato-chan! Even if you became coffee jelly, you’re still cute!”

“.....”

Kobato was indifferent to Sena’s follow up, but...

“...I happen to like coffee jelly, you know?”

“.....I-Indeed... Kukuku, if my knight says so, then I'll become dark matter...”

Hearing Yozora's comment, Kobato's mood clearly lifted.

Next, I turned my eyes to Rika.

Her class was monk... She had not only a monk's robe but was also completely bald.

It was basically a buddhist monk.

“...I know that that this is the closest thing to ‘monk’ in Japan, but still...”

“Yeah... It's a support classes like the healer and the nun, but it was careless of Rika to choose it thinking that it'd be like a monk from DragonCrest... Rika has tried out quite the number of different hairstyles, but she would've never thought that she'd see the day where Rika became fully bald...”

She said with a depressed voice.

“B-But it's still good! Even that hairstyle fits you... you know.”

“...Thank you very much.”

It looked like she didn't believe that at all, but I honestly thought that the shaved head looked good with Rika's childish round face. She looked cute with any kind of hairstyle, didn't she?

And the next one, Yukimura...

“Eh...?!”

Looking at her figure, I was dumbfounded.

Dancer—— that was supposed to be Yukimura's class. As I was contemplating what kind of costume it could be, while I knew what kind of dodge balls this game threw at one, I could only think that it'd be some kind of variety costume. But dancer ended up being the so-called sexy type... and it looked almost as if she was in her underwear. A very revealing costume indeed.

Adding to the the fact was that Yukimura now had cup size **double D**.

“Yukimura, you...”

“What is it?”

Yukimura tilted her head slightly.

It was Yukimura, but a Yukimura with two hills sprouting from her chest. It was Yukimura, but everytime she moved, they jiggled. It was so out of place.

“Yukimura-kun, you messed with the cup size, didn’t you?”

“Ohh, what a blunder~ I must have committed a mistake while putting in the measurements~”

Yukimura played dumb while pretending to have noticed it just now.

“...You weren’t that bad with computers and games the last time I checked, Yukimura-kun.”

Rika was staring heavily at Yukimura’s chest (In reality her character was the one staring, the game art was quite something).

“So that was possible too...!” Yozora murmured in regret.

Having breasts that could compete with Sena’s real ones and seeing that Sena herself was wearing an armor right now, it came down to the irregular situation of Yukimura being the sexiest member of the Neighbors Club.

“Yukimura, why did you create such a sexy character? Lately, you even stopped wearing the butler uniform and started wearing a girl’s school uniform on top of that. I hear you talking to Aoi about ‘woman power’ too... What happened to becoming a true man?”

I used this chance to ask about something I’ve been interested about for quite some time. And the answer?

“I’ve had some kind of change of mind.”

Yukimura answered indifferently.

“.....”

“.....”

“Huh? That’s it?”

“Yes.”

That indifferent reply was so like her and at the same time so straight to the point that it was manly.

“Ummm, I was hoping you would shed some light on your ‘change of mind’, some more specific details, you know...?”

“I see, so that’s how it is.”

It seemed like Yukimura really didn’t get it before, and so she said, somewhat timidly:

“If you allow me to speak truthfully, I became convinced that Yozora-anego isn’t worthy of trust.”

“Gifu!”

Yukimura said without a shred of hesitation.

Yozora choked upon hearing her saying something like that, something that’d normally be really hard to say in front of the person in question.

Yukimura turned and bowed deeply to Yozora (which was more like her).

“Yozora-anego, thank you for looking after me all this time. I believe it’s time for me to aim for my the heavens in my own way.”

“I see... You’ve grown, Yukimura...”

Yozora let out a lonely laugh and didn’t even try to come up with an excuse.

“I shall return the butler clothes once they return from the washing salon.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’m giving you the butler uniform as a farewell gift...”

“I must refuse, since it would be a **bother**, if I were to keep it at home...”

“I-I see... U-Understood.”

Yozora drooped her shoulders in a disappointed manner in real life (or at least that’s the impression I got) upon hearing Yukimura, who didn’t mince matters at all while speaking in that calm tone of hers.

She said that she didn't like the butler uniform to begin with, so now that she didn't follow Yozora anymore, the order to wear that uniform had become meaningless...

Putting Yukimura and Yozora's separation aside, I shifted my gaze to Maria.

She was wearing a black robe and pointy hat, in her hand she wielded a wand with a spear-headed gem—— A cute wizard indeed.

“...Huh...? It's a wizard, right...?”

Maria nodded energetically with a “Yep!” in reply to my question.

“Ah, the wizard class is only broken when men choose it. If female players select it, it functions rather normally.”

Rika answered in understanding to my bewilderment.

“What's with that difference in treatment...”

It wasn't much of a satisfying answer, but if Maria had something she was happy with, I guess it was all good.

At last, I opened the game's menu to see how I looked myself.

On the upper half a wrinkled t-shirt, on the lower half trunks... Say what?

“What the hell is this?!”

It was on a whole different level from the wizard (male version) which had looked like your ordinary otaku guy. This case was so hopeless that it couldn't even go out anymore, and this hopeless guy was now me...

“I-I've chosen sage, so what the hell is this?!”

“Ah. Rika just noticed it now... To get a gag class twice in a row, that's Kodaka for you... Interestingly, the state of mind that comes after the act of masturbation is referred to as 'sage time' on the net – that's where the gag for this class comes from.”

“Where in this do you see a class?!”

When I opened the ability list, the first ability I learned was ‘Take off your pants’.

And description was: ‘Takes off your pants. Your private parts will be pixelized, there's no reason to hold back (lol)’ ...The (lol) took annoyance to a whole new level.

“There are too many worthless classes in this game...”

“It just goes to show you that the creators of this game see the users as disgusting people. I really can’t tell if this’ll actually get released or not.”

“It’ll definitely get bashed, so I think it’d be better if it was cancelled.” I said wearily.

“Sigh... ‘Sage time’, eh... It would’ve been more fitting if I had chosen that class...”

Yozora said self-deploringly.

Everybody went silent, as Yozora disclosed a few hours ago that had done *that*, and waited for the uncomfortable situation to dissolve.

“A-Anyway let’s get going on our adventure!” Rika said as if to try and shake off that atmosphere, “Just like in the beta, the tutorial lasts until we beat the demon king inside Valhalla Castle, so let’s settle with defeating the demon king today!”

“This will be revenge for back then. Yozora, don’t get in my way this time.” Sena said.

“...Okay. I understand. It’d be better for me to just sit in the corner and masturbate so that I don’t get in your way, I guess...”

“I told you to stop saying that! C’mon now, let’s go!”

Sena yelled at Yozora, who had totally entered self-torture mode, and started walking away.

With Sena in the lead, everybody started moving forward, albeit slowly.

The Holy knight, the black knight, the black pudding, the wizard, the monk, the dancer, and the sage.

Our war prowess seemed unexpectedly well-balanced (apart from me, that is).



A short while after we had advanced towards Valhalla Castle, the residence of the demon king...

GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—————!

...monsters came out of the ground with some creepy cries.

Three warasubo[1] soldiers manifested themselves in front of us.

“HYOU—?!” “GYAA—?!”

Maria and Kobato both saw those creatures for the first time and screamed.

“A-AN-CHAN, T-T-THOSE ARE WARASUBO!”

“Yeah, seems you remember them too.”

As we were living in Kyushu, Kobato once happened to witness how a warasubo was cooked. The scene had scared her so much that she started to cry on the spot.

“Kukuku... t-to think that out of all places I would meet the wicked dragon waraboros here... I shall return the favor from that time...!”

“Go for it, think we can try and eat them sometime again?”

“AS IF I COULD EAT THAT!”

She refused with all her heart. Even though they were so tasty... warasubos...

“So our enemies really haven’t changed after all...”

Having some sympathy for warasubos myself, I felt a little sad.

“We’re giving those monsters a beating, Yozora!”

“Fu... I’ll make a hilt for my cursed sword out of you...” Yozora said, despite wielding the exact same sword as Sena. (We still held the beginner equipment, so this was your run-of-the-mill long sword.)

Incidentally, the fighting system in this game wasn’t turn-based but real time, so you had to time your attacks and/or support skills well.

After one took an action, there was a certain cooldown during which one could only run around or defend.

“Take this...!” “Fu...”

The two knights were attacking warasubo soldier 1 consecutively.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAA!”

However, it flung its spear horizontally and parried both attacks.

“Eh?!” “Wha—?!”

Both Sena and Yozora voiced their surprise.

Seeing the chance created by their failed attacks, warasubo soldiers 2 and 3 attacked as well.

Sena and Yozora took 5 damage each from the warasubos that attacked them.

An additional attack from warasubo 1 on Sena caused her 6 damage.

“Now you’ve done it, you disgusting alien!”

“Please be careful. Unlike the previous version, those strike back.”

Rika said and casted some healing magic on Sena.

Now that I think about it, the previous time we had played this game, the enemies’ attack patterns had still been in development, so we ended up slaughtering them one-sidedly... I couldn’t help but be moved upon seeing the warasubo being able to attack properly.

Not to mention that it seemed like the AI was quite smart. The soldiers cooperated with each other. Sena and Yozora’s attacks were skillfully defended against with, while the damage was kept to a minimum. And the other soldiers counterattacked in the created opening.

It was only the first battle, but I could tell from how bad our teamplay was that it wouldn’t be easy.

“I’ll fight ‘em, too! What should I do?!”

Maria said as she saw Sena and Yozora’s fight, and Rika started giving instructions.

“Please use the fireball spell on soldier 1 then. Once the enemy falters from it, Yukimura-kun and Kobato-chan should charge!”

“Understood.”

“Kukuku... Very well.”

Yukimura and Kobato gave their consent.

“Let’s seeeee, the fireball is this one, right? Burn to death, shitty alien!”

Maria threw a fire ball at warasubo soldier 1.

As he couldn’t guard against magic, the warasubo soldier was burned by the fireball and faltered, seeing that, Kobato unleashed black tentacles from her body and attacked him.

Additionally, Yukimura slashed the soldier with the knife that she held in both hands, while her boobs jiggled left and right.

... 'Yukimura with jiggling boobs' ... The strange feeling that came with thinking that was no laughing matter, but leaving that aside...

“Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

Warasubo soldier 1 let out a final cry, fell to the ground, and disappeared.

“Good, let’s take down soldier 2 next.”

Yozora and Kobato moved closer to soldier 2.

Soldier 2 charged at Yozora with a spear, but Yozora shielded it off.

Then Kobato used her black tentacles to attack the monster.

“Ahahaha! I’m going too!”

Maria casted a fireball as she laughed.

It went straight past the soldier—— and hit Kobato, giving her damage in the process.

“FUNGYA! WHAT ARE YOU DOING, IDIOT?!”

“I-It wasn’t on purpose! The one who’s dozing off is in the wrong!”

Seeing Kobato getting angry, Maria got flustered.

“Hey! Why’s there friendly fire now?!”

“It seems like they changed that from beta to stress the importance of teamplay. Please be careful not to hit an ally while attacking.”



Rika warned everyone to be careful while she was healing Kobato, but...

“Heee, so attacks can also hit the ones with you. We should be extra careful then, shouldn’t we?”

I could tell without a doubt that a wicked smile had found its way to Sena’s face in real life, which fully contradicted her words.

Yozora, however, remained silent so I couldn’t tell.

And thus, the two soldiers on the left attacked again.

“Futile resistance.”

Soldier 2 was taken down by Yukimura’s magnificent combo attacks (with jiggling boobs), and thus the only one left now was soldier 3.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

In the beta, warasubo soldiers spouted things about their families when they were in a pinch, it had left a very bad aftertaste to be honest, but it seemed it was taken out in this version and so soldier 3 simply kept attacking us as if nothing had happened.

“HAA!”

Yukimura light-footed evaded the attack of soldier 3 and created some distance between her and the enemy.

“Now, Yozora! Go!”

“Yeah.”

Yozora charged at warasubo soldier 3 and Sena followed shortly after.

“Let’s go! Cross Slash!”

Sena performed a big swing with the sword in her hand, executing her special move on—— Yozora.

Ah— I guess that was to be expected... I thought and sighed.

The high defensive power of the dark knight allowed Yozora to stay alive even after taking the cross slash directly, and it was her turn to take retribution on sena—— which she didn’t.

“Be more careful.”

Yozora said indifferently without even blaming her, seeing such a reaction, the bewildered Sena could only return a, ‘Ah, uh, yeah... Sorry.’, and apologized.

Soldier 3 prepared for the next attack during that and now charged at Yozora, an attack which she easily guarded.

“Sumeragi!”

“Kukuku...”

Kobato used her tentacles to strike the enemy, on which followed an attack by Yozora, who dealt the final blow.

Thus all enemies were eliminated and the battle ended with our victory.

“Kukuku... I expected nothing less from my knight, that was a spectacular show of strength...”

Said the dark pud... princess to which the dark knight reacted by putting her hand in front of her chest in an elegant, butler-like manner: “Fu... I’m honored.”

“Muu...”

Sena kept standing there idly while looking at the two of them.



After the first battle, our adventure continued smoothly.

Perhaps it was also due to our well-balanced party, but I’d say the main reason was the fact that no one was attacking each other on purpose (Which should be a given though, now that I think about it.)

First, there was Yukimura who cleverly performed attacks as our main DD despite her low defensive abilities, she healed allies with her dance while her boobs jiggled, and increased their stats – again with the jiggle dance.

Then there was Sena, who started going berserk on everything coming her way, as if she was trying to take out her frustration of being ignored by Kobato and Yozora, as the vanguard.

As there was no worry of monsters coming at us from the rear or center, from which Kobato and Maria were supporting the attacks of the front line, Rika was able to concentrate on healing the vanguard (mainly Sena), she put up barriers to nullify the opponents’ magic and buffed/supported the party.

Next was Yozora, who kept an open eye for any chances to attack the monsters, while she guarded Maria and Kobato.

And lastly, the guy who basically did nothing, me.

After defeating many warasubo monsters along the way, we finally arrived at Valhalla Castle, the home of the warasubo devil king.

He sure looked as strong as a boss, with his build being about ten times bigger than the normal warasubo soldier, and his ominous armor and giant axe.

“So you have finally arrived here, pesky humans.”

The last time this guy just came attacking without warning, but now he actually spoke.

“...But your luck ends here. I'll bath in your blood today, and then we, the chosen people of Saga prefecture, shall conquer this world and rule it as the superior race!”

The king said with a needlessly passionate voice. So those had been the people of Saga prefecture...

“I'll repay the debt from last time with interest!”

“Hmph... It's your blood that will be spilled on the floor today.”

“Kukuku... Thou shalt receive a taste of our true powers...”

“A devil king like you will only get his butt kicked!”

Sena, Yozora, Kobato, and Maria started preparing themselves for battle, Yukimura started dancing and buffed the party's offensive powers, while Rika used her techniques to buff our defensive powers.

“GUOOOOOOO!”

The devil king charged at us while swinging his ax and the battle finally begun.

The devil king's attacks were very powerful, but his attack patterns hadn't changed much from when we played last, thus everyone, with the exception of Kobato and Maria who were seeing him for the first time, was able to perform well and the battle was proceeding in our favour.

Last time Yozora had abandoned Sena, and Sena had tickled Yozora in real life to hinder her playing – there was no such thing this time.

Every time I looked, the devil king's large pool of hitpoints had been chipped down a bit more. I thought that victory was dead sure.

...Our victory? That was quite wrong...

I for one was taking refuge at the edge of the stage to not be a hindrance.

Though, I had learned new abilities as I leveled up, but they were things like, 'Prepare to fap', 'Prepare tissues', or 'Lock the door', which were only useful when you wanted to have fun alone, I wasn't even able to get into said 'sage time'.

Right now, I wasn't even a sage... I was nothing but a NEET.

"Haaa... Ah—"

push.

I sighed while I was checking out the list of worthless skills I had and accidentally pushed the button for the 'Take down your pants'.

And so I (or more like my character) started hastily taking down my pants.

"Wha— UWAAA, WAIT, ME!"

I got flustered and tried to cancel it as fast as possible, but I didn't know how.

"Eh, wait, Kodaka? What the——?!"

The first to notice was Rika.

"Aniki... So bold..."

Yukimura said as she was staring in my direction.

"D-Don't look!"

Even if it was blurred out, to have a character that looked exactly like me showing it's lower half was so embarrassing that I could've died.

"H-How the hell do you put them back on?!"

"Umm, once you take your pants off, it's impossible to put them back on until the battle is over."

"Hey, Rika! The defensive barrier is going off! What are you d——?"

Yozora was engaged in close combat with the devil king when she looked back and became speechless.

"K-Kodaka?! W-What are you doing?!"

Yozora's movements stopped, and in that moment, a powerful slash came from devil king right at her back.

“Shi—”

A strike at her back, which was a critical strike to make matters worse, meant that Yozora was killed instantly.

Yozora's body fell to the ground and spilled blood all over.

“Onee— M-My knight!”

Kobato screamed in shock.

...Didn't she try to say 'Onee-chan' just now? I didn't know she was attached to Yozora that much...

Now that he killed Yozora, the devil king had his eyes on Kobato and was charging at her.

“I'll protect you, Kobato-chan! Hurry up and hide behind my back now!”

“NO!”

“(´・ω・`)”

Then, after she had refused Sena's help, Kobato tried to run into a different direction, but was cornered in front of a wall soon after, and took a direct hit.

As the dark pudding had great defensive powers, even such a direct hit couldn't take her down. But as she kept running away into another direction than the party was at and then got cornered, she simply kept taking hit after hit where even Rika's healing magic couldn't reach. And thus Kobato died without much resistance.

“You dare do that to Kobato-chan, you bastard!”

Sena went swinging her sword at the devil king throwing whatever abilities she had and dealt a big amount of damage in the process, but was also struck down by the devil king and died.

The party had their main fighters taken down and was now easy prey for the devil king. Consequently, Yukimura, Maria, and Rika fell by his hands in that order. The remaining guy with his manhood dangling out (me) was given a swift death soon after.

And after this battle, no one was to ever see our heroes again.

And exactly like last time, a narration was heard in a grim voice and the screen blacked out. Only the phrase ‘GAME OVER’ appeared, covered in blood.



The stupid thing I (once again my character) did, lowered the morale of the group. And as it was fairly late already, we swore to definitely beat the devil king next time and quit the game.

“Geez, it’s all because Kodaka started doing such a lewd thing...”

“Exactly. Why in the world would you start stripping right then and there, are you an idiot?”

Yozora and Sena kept complaining to me while their faces reddened slightly.

“It’s a real shame that it was blurred.”

“You want to make this an 18+ game, Yukimura-kun...?”

Rika replied to Yukimura, who had said that with a face of true disappointment.

“Hey, hey. Why did the place around onii-chan’s dick look strange? Back then, Onii-chan’s peepee had that kind feeling to it and I wanted to see it again.”

“M-Maria please I’m begging you stop talking about my thing....”

“...Hee... So Kodaka’s has a kind feeling to it...”

Rika said totally interested and my face grew even hotter.

“B-But honestly, it’s been a while since we did a Neighbors-Club-like activity like this.”

“Whose fault do you think it is that we haven’t done any activities for so long, eh?”

I stiffened up after being scolded by Sena, but then Kobato said, “It’s your fault too...”, in a small voice, which caused Sena’s face to stiffen too.

“I-In any case to make up for the lost time we’ll be playing a lot, so keep that in mind!”

“Ah, yeah! You’re right!”

Sena said in an attempt to hide her fluster and I followed up in a hurry.

“Then let’s do something next week as well!”

“No need to wait until next week, it could be tomorrow or the day after it. We’re all free during holidays after all... We should go karaoke again or something.”

“That’s quite the good idea for someone like Yozora! I’ll make you all shiver with my angel-like voice this time!”

“You go sing alone.”

“Kukuku, my knight... If this is your desire, then I shall lend you ‘KuroNecro’s character song CD... We’ll be singing the duet between Reisis and Shen-fa.”

“Hooo, so there was something like that? I’ll arrange for us to sing it.”

“K-Kobato-chan, do a duet with me t-gyapo!”

Sena got once again struck down by the flyswatter when she tried to approach Kobato.

“Then the day after tomorrow... On sunday we go karao—”

“Ah, sorry guys, tomorrow and the day after I’ve already got things to do.”

Once I interrupted Yozora, everybody looked my way at once.

“You have plans on the weekend, you say...? Did you become a normal...!”

“It’s Kodaka, and yet for such an audacious thing to happen!”

“Kukuku... I bet it’s needed to make tonkotsu ramen, isn’t it?”

“That ain’t it! Even I have something planned for the weekend sometimes, idiots... It’s just extremely rare...”

After I finished saying that poutingly, Rika said:

“I wonder what plans occupy you on both days?”

“That’s, umm...”

There isn’t really a need to hide it, but I’ve got the feeling that if I blurt it right out, these guys are gonna get mad. But I guess deceiving them would be dishonest too, so I’ll just say the truth...

“That?”

“Yeah... You’re right...” Yozora nodded.

“Indeed.” “Yes.”

It seemed like Yukimura and Rika also got it.

Yozora started to draw a deep breath and declared our next activity,

“We shall be going on that trip as well!”

...in a bombastic manner, as befitting of a club president.

Chapter 11: The First Wing: Redundant Volume ~ And the Story of the Lonely Man who was Once a Protagonist ~

The next day. Saturday morning, a little before eight.

We had all gathered in St. Chronica Academy's parking lot.

All of us means the four student council members, as well as the Neighbors Club and me. Only Sena hadn't arrived yet.

Yozora and the others, normally open hearted in the club room, were now nervously silent. Yozora herself had her hands folded and leaned on the wall. Kobato was for some reason striking a pose besides her. And Maria was bustling around them.

Somewhat apart from the rest, Rika had seated herself wearing a melancholic expression, and standing even a bit farther away was Yukimura, expressionless as usual.

All of the present people were wearing plain clothes, Yozora was wearing her infamous black jersey (I guess she looked a bit chubbier than usual because she wore some extra clothes underneath to shield off the cold), Kobato wore a dress with a cape, and Maria was wearing a white duffle coat.

Rika had some pants with fluffy boots on her, a down coat, a thick shale, and some ear muffs on top.

"I see you're fully armored." I voiced my thoughts, and Rika replied in an absolute serious manner, "We're going to a snowy mountain, you know? This isn't the time for girl power!" But I thought that she looked cute in her clothes nonetheless.

Yukimura wore a mini-skirt, long boots, and a cardigan, it looked cute on her too. On the other hand she seemed to be cold, which made it even cuter. When Rika had seen Yukimura's clothes, she said baffled, "Yukimura-kun, do you want to die?!"

On this trip, the plan was to simply relax in the hotel for the most part, so there wouldn't be a need to go out. There were, of course, no plans to go to the mountains either.

On the student council's side, Aoi was looking around nervously while she stood at a spot somewhat far from the Neighbors Club. Karin was spacing out, looking sleepy. Last, Hinata-san and Akane-san were chatting with each other.

Aoi, like Yukimura, had a Mini-skirt on her – despite the weather. That was some fighting spirit she showed.

Karin was wearing a long coat and had crosses hanging all over her as usual.

Akane-san wore jeans with a blouson and stole. It was simple, but it could also be seen as stylish.

Hinata-san was wearing a plain school jersey..... Well, it was just a jersey. So she was a jersey-ist too, huh.....

“I’m sorry it turned out like this, they all just insisted on coming along all of a sudden...”

I approached them and apologised for now.

When Yozora had declared that they’d come along separately on the trip, there had only been one day left. I had wondered how the heck they’d pull that off, but Sena talked to Pegasus-san and he made it happen. Chairman power. Scary.

Not to mention that *all* members made it here... It was similar to what happened on the training camp and the amusement park, their agility was as tremendous as ever when it came to these spontaneous things. It wouldn’t be exaggerated to call it a gathering of people with too much time on their hands.

“It certainly did surprise me, I must say. But the more the merrier, so isn’t it fine?”

Akane-san said and laughed in a refreshing fashion.

“Y-Yes, indeed. It’s as you said.”

Hinata-san on the other hand seemed quite bewildered.

As she usually was bold – the three others aside – I expected her to burst out in laughter upon seeing this kind of situation unfold. So this reaction surprised to me.

“Is there something wrong?”

“N-Not really, there’s nothing wrong! It’s just that...”

Hinata-san shifted the gaze to where Yozora, Kobato, and Maria were at.

A middle schooler and a 10-year-old. I guess being told that kids are coming along on a trip like this is enough to be taken aback.

“I’ll take care of the kids, so rest assured.” I said.

“The kids? Ah, it’s not that.”

Hinata-san had made a puzzled face for a second.

“If it’s not them, then... is it Yozora? Ah, that all-black girl is our club leader, Mikadzuki Yozora.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Hinata-san took a quick glimpse of Yozora once again.

It also happened that Yozora was looking this way too, so their eyes met. In that instant, Yozora's lips became crooked, revealing her teeth.

Yozora called Hinata-san a 'normalfag' (An existence that stands above all humans which are fulfilled with their real life) and seemed to hate her one-sidedly, but I found the fact that she hated someone of higher grade who she didn't even know quite unlike her.

"Could it be that you're acquainted with Yozora, Hinata-san?"

".....Yeah."

Hinata-san gave an unusually hesitant nod.

"Yozora said she didn't talk with the president before, though."

".....So she even said that."

Hinata-san's expression darkened.

"But it's actually true that I've never spoken with 'Mikadzuki Yozora' before."

"...? What do you mean?"

Not knowing what she was talking about, I tilted my neck.

".....I'm saying that Yozora's former name was 'Hidaka'."

"Her former name...? 'Hidaka'.....?!"

Seeing my shock once I perceived her words, Hidaka Hinata-san smiled bitterly and said:

"Yozora's my little sister."

"Little sister——"

"I-It seems our ride has arrived."

The moment I wanted to investigate the matter further, a mini bus had entered the parking lot.

Sena was sitting next to the driver.

And the driver was...

“Pegasus-san?!”

None other than the chairman of Saint Chronica Academy himself, Kashiwazaki Pegasus-san.



“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Kodaka-kun?”

“I-It has...”

While I got, for some reason, the seat next to him instead of Sena, Pegasus-san kept talking cheerfully during the travel, and I could do nothing but reply with a stiff face.

The bus offered 14 seats including the driver’s. Four in the very back, with Yozora, Kobato, Maria, and Sena on them.

Two in the front of that row, the right side, with Yukimura and Aoi.

One next to those on the left, with Rika.

Only Karin in the row in front of the aforementioned two-seat row. And last, the row right behind Pegasus-san and me, with Akane-san and Hinata-san.



“Excuse me, but... why are you our driver, Chairman? I heard the one picking us up would be the student council’s supervisor...”

“When I heard that you kids were coming along on the trip, I had her switch with me. I have a licence, so don’t worry. Hahaha.”

“I-I see, haha...”

Seeing the chairman laughing, I decided to laugh along for now.

Our destination was the hotel near the skiing place, located in the prefecture next to ours. So it appeared that the time we’d need until we arrived there would be about four hours.

Four... long... hours...

And since I was seated next to Pegasus-san, talking with anyone else was hard.

And since I hadn’t talked to him since the month before— when I had lifted the misunderstanding about Sena and me— it was even more awkward.

If at least Rika had been in the seat behind me, it would’ve been fine. But it seemed like she wasn’t too fond of interacting with Pegasus-san either. When boarded the bus, he approached her cheerfully, ‘Shiguma-kun, I hope you’re doing well!’ to which Rika replied awkwardly, ‘Y-Yes, thank you.’, bowed slightly and went ahead to hide herself in the back of the bus.

The student council members were also present after all, so I had thought they might start some sort of entertainment during the trip. But the situation with six additional folks coming along – one of them being the academy chairman to top it off – was probably too out of the usual and sudden to expect them to have something prepared.

When I looked back through the mirror, I could see Akane-san and Hinata-san discussing a print. Most probably student council work, I’d say. Recalling the huge amount of work that had piled up after christmas two weeks ago, they probably didn’t really have the time to go on a trip like this. So to not waste time, they were pushing themselves to make the most of it now and to play around later... That was probably the way normal did things.

The two sitting by themselves, Karin and Rika, were both looking outside while listening to music, it had the same kind of feeling when people were by themselves on a school trip or outing. I, too, had made that kind of experiences, but it felt quite lonesome to look at nonetheless.

Karin was in her usual expressionless mode, so I couldn’t tell whether she was busy with herself or not, but I could see Rika taking a glimpse at Yozora’s group behind her now and then, and at Yukimura and Aoi across from her.

Yukimura and Aoi were happily chatting away about fashion. The girl talk of two bishoujos. You could say that those two were the only ones practicing ‘normalfaggotry’ here.

In the seats at the very back, Yozora and Kobato were talking cheerfully with each other, while Sena was trying to get into their conversation and was shot down in the process. Maria was trying to get some attention from Sena, in which consequence Sena took out some candy to bribe her into staying quiet.

I couldn't help but getting a bit dizzy on seeing this scene that showed the manifestation of the difficulties of human relationships in their plain and natural form.

“Hahaha, being with ten school girls sure is noisy, isn't it?”

“I-Indeed.”

I just answered whatever crossed my mind.

“So, which one is your favorite?”

“F-Favorite? That kinda thing is... Hahaha...”

“Hahaha, all of them are wonderful after all, hahaha.”

Pegasus-san laughed mischievously for some reason.

“T-That's right... Hahaha...”

“With so many girls around you, any anxiety you might've had must've died, right?”

“No, well, I guess... Hahaha.”

“Ahahaha...”

My stomach churned, and while remembering a somewhat painful sensation, I let out a dry laugh.

Pegasus-san's eyes didn't look humorous to me at all despite the fact that it looked like he was engaging in light gossip.

Seeing that I had broken my engagement with his daughter about a month ago (that's what had been decided, at least for the time being...), my experience was extremely lacking and no help when it came to how to go around him.

“You're sweating quite a lot, Kodaka-kun. Is the AC too good perhaps?”

“T-That might just be the case, hahaha...”

“I see, but perhaps due to my age, I’m feeling quite cold. Please bear with it for a little while longer.”

“Y-Yes, please don’t worry about it...”

It’s not cold because of your age but because of your clothes, (he was wearing his usual wardrobe) is what I thought, but I gulped it down.

I wondered how much does this person did actually knew to begin with?

How much did Sena tell him about her confessing and my reply?

From what I could tell, Sena and Pegasus-san didn’t talk that much at home, so it was probably safe to assume that she didn’t tell him about it...

“...You see, even though I don’t look like it now, but I was quite popular back in my school days.” Pegasus-san suddenly said.

To be honest, he still looked quite young and handsome to me, so I found it quite convincing that he had been popular during his younger days.

“Ahh, I-I see...”

“I was quite envied by those around, but at the time, all that buzz of women around me just felt like noise, really.”

Pegasus-san said with a tone that surely carried his true feelings.

“...There’s no one but me to decide what is happiness for me is. That’s why I had to think. So that I wouldn’t have regrets...”

Those words felt like advice for me and yet like something he was telling himself.

“...To be honest, just the other day Stella told me that she had found a lover.”

“Huh?!”

I raised my voice in surprise upon being told that with a totally serious tone.

Why the hell would this person tell me about the playboy who stole his servant’s heart? I really couldn’t get him...

“I-I see... Well, Stella-san is pretty after all.”

The fact that she didn’t have a lover until recently was more surprising, to be honest.

“Yeah... Her partner has guts too... I could approve of him with no regret.”

...Why does he need Pegasus-san's approval to begin with?

Pegasus-san heaved a deep and lonely sigh.

“Perhaps thinking stuff like ‘I want to protect her, to save her, to make her happy...’ was foolish after all... Both she and him will without doubt become strong on their own. She has been saved in a place I didn’t know about, by a man who wasn’t me, and she has reached happiness somewhere my hands couldn’t reach——”

“.....”

His monologue was something I couldn’t completely understand.

To want to protect and save, thinking such a thing was foolish—— It felt like those words were stinging my chest.

Chapter 12: Both Student Council Members

After that, my conversation with Pegasus-san continued. However, it was mostly just the usual reminiscing about the good old times with my dad.

Not only did I have no personal interest in anything he was saying, but even with all the good intent in the world, it would still be difficult for anyone to flatter Pegasus-san's conversational skills. He would suddenly change the scene of the story, or would go on a loop with the same tale over and over again. Thus, while still feeling bad about it, I gave up listening and pretended I was asleep in the middle of it all.

I spent about an hour in such a state before we arrived at a rest stop – a service station. We then proceeded to have lunch there before setting off once more. Again, I couldn't wait more than one hour before pretending to be asleep, and ended up spending the trip in a sort of ascetic state. After all that had ended, we finally arrived at our destination, the inn.

It was a building with an ancient air to it; apparently the inn had been in business for 50 years.

The old man who was the proprietor of the inn came out to meet us and greeted Pegasus-san heartily. Pegasus-san, however, seemed to be quite shy and as he was talking a wry smile found its way to his face.

It seemed that they had been using this inn even during the period when St. Chronica was an all girls' school, and they had come here every year for the ski training.

They were applying artificial snow in various places in preparation for the open season so that people could use the slopes. However, the majority of skiers would not arrive for quite some time.

On this trip, the few groups of old people staying with us weren't up for skiing as much as they were up for the hot springs.

“Now then..... seeing as we have the chance now, let's do the self-introductions, shall we? Yes yes, I'm well aware it's a bit late for that now, so you don't need to say it again.”

Akane-san said that, addressing the group after we entered the lobby.

“I'm the student council Vice President, Ootomo Akane. I'm a third year, nice to meet you all.”

“I'm the student council President, Hidaka Hinata. I hope we can all get along.”

“.....Student council secretary, Jinguuji Karin. Class 2-4.”

After she finished, Karin lowered her eyes, looking at Aoi.

“M-Me too? Umm..... I’m the student council treasurer Yusa Aoi..... I-I’m sorry for the trouble I caused you the other day...”

It seemed like the memory of being struck down by both Sena and Yozora after trying to shut down the Neighbors Club still weighed on Aoi’s mind, and she ended up introducing herself uncomfortably.

“T-Then it’s the Neighbors Club’s turn now!” I pressed.

“I am called Kusunouki Yukimura, I offer you my greetings once again.”

The first one to introduce herself politely was Yukimura, who was already acquainted with the student council. Nice one, Yukimura!

“I’m Takayama Maria, the club’s advisor and a real teacher, I’m also a teacher! Ahahaha!”

Maria continued thereafter and introduced herself. Now that I think about it, she became a real teacher the other day, didn’t she?

“T-Teacher?” All the members of the council, with the exception of Aoi, were confused.

“.....Ah, I’m from class 1-4, Shiguma Rika.”

Rika gave a simple introduction and lowered her gaze.

“.....Hasegawa Kobato.”

Perhaps it’s because she uncharacteristically read the mood, but this time Kobato didn’t introduce herself as Reisis Vi Felicity Sumeragi, and used her real name.

“I’m Kashiwazaki Sena. A goddess as you can see.”

Sena introduced herself pompously as usual. This was the one person who never changed.

Seeing Sena’s attitude, Aoi stammered a “Fugugu.....” Her enmity with Sena obviously hadn’t gone away yet.

And lastly:

“.....Mikadzuki Yozora.”

Without even looking at Hinata-san directly, Yozora said nothing but her name in a curt manner.

Hinata-san let out a small sigh.

As if trying to move the conversation forward, Yozora turned her back on the student council and said:

“So, Meat, how are the rooms going to be split?”

“We already had two rooms for two people reserved, so we went ahead and reserved two more for four.”

“So it will be the four from the student council, Kodaka and the chairman..... who’s left is...”

So I really will be left with the chairman in one room after all...

“I’ll share a room with Kobato-chan, of course!”

“No!”

After instantly denying Sena’s request, Kobato ran away from Sena’s side and hid herself behind Yozora’s back.

“What if we mix up the Neighbors Club and the student council? To deepen our friendship.”

Akane-san suggested.

Yozora made a clearly annoyed face and whispered in a small voice:

.....Why do we need to deepen our friendship...

“Eh? Did you say something?”

“.....Nothing at all.”

Yozora muttered.

Akane-san’s “Eh? Did you say something?” was like my old favorite question, which was to be asked whether you heard the person properly or not, and thus sort of ruining the moment for them, without it being clear if it was done intentionally or not. This, in turn, makes them hesitate to say it again and usually leads to them dropping the whole thing—— a question that denies the other.

“Are the others in on that as well?”

“‘As well’, she says...”

Seeing how she was naturally manipulated into giving her approval, Yozora put on a dissatisfied expression.

Rika and Kobato seemed against it as well, but as they were both shy around strangers, and facing what seemed to be the aura of a ‘normal’ radiating from Akane-san, they kept silent and didn’t object.

I did think her way was a bit forceful, but I was all for deepening the friendship between the student council and the Neighbors Club, so I didn’t say anything..... I was going to stay with the old guy anyway, so the girls ended up using rock-paper-scissor to decide the room compositions.

With that said, the girls were deciding the room assignments by battling it out in Rock-paper-scissors.

“Let’s split the rooms up in 3-4-3 then after we’re done with the Rock-paper-scissors.”

“It’d be great if we ended up together, Yukkii.”

“Indeed, it would.”

As Yukimura and Aoi had their own smiley interaction:

“Rock-paper-scissors! Rock-paper-scissors!”

Upon Akane-san’s call, the battle for the room compositions began.

The results:

1 — Kashiwazaki Sena, Kusunoki Yukimura, Takayama Maria, and Yusa Aoi.

2 — Hidaka Hinata, Ootomo Akane, and Shiguma Rika.

3 — Mikadzuki Yozora, Hasegawa Kobato, and Jinguuji Karin.

Yukimura and Aoi, Yozora and Kobato; in other words, those who got along well with each other were happy, while Akane-san and Hinata-san jested to each other like the best friends they were, “So it seems that our undesirable and inseparable relationship has been fated to continue even now.”

Sena on the other hand seemed displeased, but I hoped from the bottom of my heart that this would be a chance for her to deepen her relationship with Yukimura and Aoi.

Maria was also quite attached to Sena, so it was probably okay.

The real problem were the two who were out of their comfort zone; namely Rika and Karin.

“Excuse me, Jinguuji-senpai..... if you’re not against it, would you like to trade rooms?”

Perhaps because staying with two third-years in one room was too much for her, Rika offered a suggestion to Karin.

Karin would naturally accept this offer—— or so I thought:

“Nein.”

After refusing her proposition without a moment of consideration, Karin gave Rika a sidelong glance and said:

“I’m Jinguuji Karin, I hope we can get along.”

After which she bowed to her roommates, Yozora and Kobato.

The two of them looked hesitant, but they replied regardless with: “Ah, yeah...”, “Kukuku..... Y-You have my regards...” Now that it’s come to this, changing rooms was no longer an option.

Akane-san noticed Rika standing there in anxiety, so she reassured her:

“Shiguma Rika-san, I believe? You really don’t have to be so nervous. Today, all that Senpai and Kouhai is of no importance. It’d make me very happy if you could relax a little.”

“Right...”

Rika gave only a vague reply.

She wasn’t the type who could just loosen up if she was told to so plain and simple, so I was a bit worried.



Pegasus-san’s chat with the owner concluded and we all headed off to our rooms.

They were all located on the second floor. Pegasus-san and I were staying in room 203, Sena and her group in room 205, Hinata-san and her group in room 206, while Yozora and her group were in 207.

The room Pegasus and I were staying in was a Japanese style 10-tatami mat sized room, thus there were no toilet or bath.

“Well then, it’s been a while since we got a chance to relax like this, so let’s make the best of it, shall we?”

Pegasus-san said with a pleased expression, as he opened the sliding door of the room.

On the other side was a balcony, and if you looked out from the window, a chain of white mountains lined up in the distance.

“The scenery is really beautiful, isn’t it?”

As I gave my honest impression, Pegasus-san responded with a satisfied ‘Hmm’ and nodded, then he took a seat on the tatami chair and started pouring some tea.

As he poured tea for me as well, I sat down and began drinking.

Tea while gazing at the snowy mountains. Ah~~ so relaxing.

“Fu..... now that I think about, I remember going with Hayato and the guys once to a hot-spring hotel just like this——”

I thought he had calmed down as well, but it seemed like that wasn’t the case.

Seeing that the whole ‘good times’ talk about my father was going to start up again, I hurriedly gulped down my tea. *Wait a sec, hadn’t he already told me the exact same story on the bus?*

“E-Excuse me, I need to go to the toilet for a bit.”

“Eh? Ah, I see.”

Leaving the somewhat disappointed Pegasus-san alone, I left the room.



After I was done in the bathroom, I decided to go to the shop on the first floor to kill some more time. When I arrived in front of the store, I bumped into Yozora, Kobato, and Karin.

The three of them were wearing yukatas and holding towels.

“Kodaka.”

Yozora then noticed me and started up a conversation.

“Hey..... are you guys heading to the bath already?”

“Yeah, there isn’t really much else to do, after all...”

The student council’s original plan for today had been to ‘Chillax’ anyway, and naturally the Neighbors Club had no plans themselves.

Seeing that we have the rare chance of being in a hot springs hotel, I guess the natural course of action would be to hit the bath then.

The hotel’s public bath seemed to be quite big, not to mention it had outdoor baths as well.

“I see..... then maybe I should go to the bath as well.”

“Is that so..... t-then how about we go to the mixed bath together?”

Yozora asked in a teasing tone.

That red face. If it was so embarrassing to say, then she should have kept it to herself...

Apparently, in this hotel, in addition to the normal male and female baths, there was also a mixed outdoor bath.

Naturally, it was closed for students during the actual ski trip, but that didn’t appear to be the case this time...

But to think that Yozora would say something like that...

“I-It’s just a joke! Don’t think about it so seriously, idiot!”

“I-I knew that!”

“Hmpf!”

Yozora turned on her heel and walked away.

“Kukuku..... let us go conquer it together, my Knight...”

Added Kobato, who was following Yozora with hurried footsteps.

However, Karin was the only one not to have started walking.

“.....”

Wordlessly and expressionlessly, Karin gazed at the sight of the two walking away.

“.....Even her appearance from behind is lovely.”

Karin said suddenly.

“Eh?” As I asked in reply, Karin turned, and started staring at me intensely.

I started to get flustered from the expressionless eyes that were staring deep into mine.

Student council secretary, Jinguuji Karin—— among all the members of the student council, I found her personality the most difficult to assess.

She always did her work wordlessly and indifferently, and if you called out to her, the best you would get back was a half-assed response. It wasn't just towards me, it seemed that she was like that with everyone.

I got the feeling she wasn't all that compatible with Hinata-san or Aoi, who were more of the energetic type.

“.....Umm, do you need something?”

I asked, as I felt the awkwardness level in the air reach nine thousand. Karin nodded slightly.

“Hasegawa-kun, there is something I'd like to ask you.”

“Something you want to ask?”

“What type of person is Yozora-oneesama?”

“.....Huh?”

After hearing the question, which could have only been born out of a misunderstanding, Karin repeated.

“What type of person is Yozora-oneesama?”

After hearing the question twice, I still didn't get it.

“.....What type of person, you ask...”

My impression of Yozora from ten years ago, and that from half a year ago, were constantly being shaken, and so I felt unable to explain things very well.

“Why do you want to know more about Yozora? To begin with, why call her ‘Onee-sama’?”

“I feel fate is involved.”

“.....Excuse me?”

Seeing the dumbfounded look on my face, Karin’s cheeks got a little redder.

Karin then clasped the cross around her neck in both hands and started speaking with a drowsy face.

“When I saw Yozora-oneesama this morning, I understood. The moment I laid my eyes on her, I knew; this person was the other half of my soul torn away from me when I was born. Awe-inspiring beauty, a refreshing voice with that dismissive tone; she was even in clad black like the fallen angel Lucifer——”

“It’s only a jersey, you know?”

My tsukkomi act was ignored by the way.

“Just looking into Yozora-oneesama’s eyes makes me feel as if my soul is about to be swallowed up whole.”

“Isn’t that just your imagination?”

“I feel like I could get fertilized just by hearing Yozora-oneesama’s voice.”

“As if!”

I threw a tsukkomi at Karin with all my power, who had begun saying some pretty outrageous things.

“I want to have Yozora-oneesama’s baby.”

“You can’t.”

“I want to have sex with Yozora-oneesama.”

“Your words are becoming more and more direct, oi...”

I could feel my face heating up.

“First, I’d have her step on my cheek with her foot.”

“So you already have specific kinds of roleplay in mind...”

“And then——”

“You don’t have to explain any further! Ummm, so is it like that.....? You like Yozora in a sexual manner?”

“I hope you can refrain from using such vulgar language. It is our souls that are in love with each other.”

Karin pouted a little as she said that.

.....Now I’m sure of it. She’s a weirdo...!

This overflowing crazy aura..... to think she was hiding such an aura...

So this was the reason she refused to exchange rooms with Rika.

“So, what’s it gonna be? Tell me more about Yozora-oneesama.”

“Even if you ask me that.....” I thought a little and said, “I don’t really know that much about her.”

Now that I’ve actually put it into words, it feels a bit lonely.

I became aware of the fact that I truly know nothing about Yozora once again.

“Anything’s fine, like things she likes or things she hates for example.”

“Things she likes..... ah..... she often brings Pocky and chocolate with her to eat, so I’d say she likes that kind of thing. She also drinks coffee pretty often, and she said she likes coffee jelly as well.”

Intending to confirm things to myself as well, I rummaged through my memory while answering.

“Chocolate..... that’s quite a good thing to know. I really want to feed Yozora-oneesama chocolate mouth-to-mouth.”

“Also..... it also seems she likes reading and going to the movies.”

“That’s Onee-sama for you, such intellectual hobbies. I like reading myself. What kind of books does Onee-sama like I wonder?”

“Who knows...? She always puts a cover on them, and even if you ask her she either gives a nonsensical answer or ignores you. But from the peeks I’ve been taking every now and then, the books she reads seem to be fairly difficult. Also, I think she reads manga despite not showing it.”

“I see..... incidentally, does she like Yuri novels?”

Karin gave me a gaze brimming with expectation.

“Yuri eh..... I wonder what she thinks of it.”

She seemed to like the BL ‘Homoge Club’, but I’m not sure what her take on Yuri would be.

“As for the things she hates...”

The first thing that came to mind was Sena. And then Hinata-san.

“Normalfags, I guess..... she’s always saying ‘Die, die!’ after all.”

“What are these ‘normalfags’ you speak of...?”

“It’s a slang word describing those who are fulfilled in their real lives.”

“I think we could say then, that she hates this unfair world of ours to the point where its ruin would give her delight. Sowing the seeds to this world’s destruction like the great fallen angel—
— Ahh♥ you’re so cool, Onee-sama.”

Her face spellbound, Karin exclaimed in ecstasy.

“I really don’t think it’s something that spectacular though...”

“Thank you. You were quite informative.”

She returned to her usual expressionlessness, thanked me with that indifferent tone of hers, and started to walk away.

.....I wonder if it’s really okay to just let her go to the bath with Yozora, when she’s like this.

“Ahem, please take care not to do something that would be labeled as a crime.”

“No need to worry. We’re both women after all.”

Without even turning, Karin answered indifferently.

“Even if you’re both women, what are you planning to do...?”

“A truly holy exchange of souls, that’s what.”

“.....I’ll say this just in case, but you do know that even if you’re both women, forcing..... it’s that simply doing *that* kind of thing is a crime, you know?”

“.....Eh?”

For a fleeting moment, it seemed the thought had crossed her mind to do something sexual without any thought towards a proper relationship, but Karin kept walking away in silence without looking back.

Will it really be okay, I wonder...?

But well, I never realized that Karin was so passionate.

I thought she was a quiet person, but it seems she is considerably talkative. I think she had spoken more words just then than the sum of everything she had said during my week with the student council.

Everyone seems to have different sides to them.

I believe I've just become acquainted with Karin for the first time.



I was in the middle of returning to my room after I separated from Karin, but this time it was Hinata-san and Akane-san who I met in the hallway.

They were also wearing yukatas and holding towels.

“Are the two of you also heading to the bath?”

“Yup! When you’re staying at a hot springs inn you just gotta go in the hot springs, right?!”

Hinata-san gave a hearty smile.

“Um, where’s Rika...?”

I asked them out of curiosity, and a troubled look popped up on both of their faces.

“We invited her to come into the hot springs with us, but it seems she wasn’t feeling well, so she’s resting up in the room for awhile. Certainly, her face did seem a bit off-color, so we decided to go with just the two of us.”

Akane-san answered, and then Hinata-san added:

“Well, you can enter the hot springs as many times as you want. When the time is right for Shiguma, I believe we’ll go in together. After all, the best way to open up your heart to others is to hang out in the nude you know! Like Akane-san and myself, every time we have a fight we go to the public bath and chat until we start to feel dizzy.”

“Hina. That topic is.....” said Akane-san, while looking somewhat embarrassed.

“Even you two fight with each other sometimes?”

“It happens all the time actually.”

Akane-san let out a strained laugh.

“Although, it’s usually because this person is guilty of being an idiot.”

As Akane-san pointed her finger at her, Hinata-san started to sulk like a child:

“What are you saying? Even when I honestly apologize, Akane always frets over the minor details, so she’s the one in the wrong.”

“Though calling them ‘minor details’ makes it seem like you haven’t really reflected upon yourself. I mean, even when I contacted you about this trip——”

She suddenly stopped in the middle of her sentence.

“.....Well, we do fight every now and again, I guess.”

Akane-san’s face started to turn red in embarrassment as she smiled wryly.

For some reason, these two kind of remind me of Pegasus-san and my dad. Pegasus-san also seems to do a considerable amount of bad mouthing when he talks about my old man.

Hinata-san and Akane-san had known each other since elementary school if I recalled correctly.

In addition to knowing the parts of each other that they dislike, they also fought quite often, but when they’re together you could say that they were true friends..... that’s what I thought.

Now that I think of it, in the old TV dramas that I used to watch, there were dialogues like ‘even though I can name 10 flaws you have, I still love you!’

.....If I had to name all of the flaws of the Neighbors Club members, I don’t think 10 would be enough.

“Oh yeah, so about Yozora?”

Suddenly remembering, I changed the topic.

“Ah,” Hinata-san said while putting on a bit of a troubled face:

“Well, there’s quite a bit to say. Our parents got a divorce when we were very young. I went with our father, and Yozora went with our mother.”

I didn't have anything to say to Hinata-san, who started to explain without any hesitation.

“After the divorce we went to different elementary and middle schools. It wasn't until high school that we were finally able to see each other again, but to be frank, we avoided each other..... however!”

After Hinata-san muttered that somewhat lonesomely, she suddenly smiled ambitiously.

“I don't know what kind of mental state she's in, but she's finally somewhere I can reach her. I'm going to use this trip to see if Yozora and I can become friends!”

“G-Good luck! I'll be cheering you on.”

I cheered on Hinata-san who had declared her determination. It's good for sisters to be on good terms with each other.

“Ah, now that you mention it, Yozora was heading to the hot springs a while ago.”

“What?! This is my chance! I have to hurry and go wash Yozora's back!”

With eyes filled with joy, Hinata-san hurried off to the hot springs.

Akane-san said “Oh boy” and shrugged her shoulders before following after Hinata-san.

“Um, Akane-san.”

I called out to stop Akane-san.

“Hm?”

“Is it possible that when we were assigning rooms, you mixed up the student council and Neighbors Club all for Hinata-san's sake?”

“.....You're pretty sharp, aren't you.”

At my question, a wry smile appeared on Akane-san's face.

Of all the people I know, Akane-san was the most normal, so I was concerned for her and tried to read into the situation.

Using something like “it's our long awaited chance” as a pretext and despite the fact that it was obvious there were people she didn't like, she forcibly mixed the Neighbors Club members in. I was worried because I was sure that it must be stressful for her.

“I had hoped that Hina would be in the the same room as her little sister. Although things didn't turn out that way, it's not bad for her to become friends with her kouhais.”

And then a lonesome smile suddenly appeared on Akane-san's face as she said,

“.....Because it's not like there won't be a day when I'm unable to be by Hina's side you know...”

“Eh?”

I didn't understand the meaning of what she had said, but Akane-san put on a gentle smile and said:

“I'll be off then, Hasegawa-kun.”

Turning around, she quickly headed towards the bathhouse.



Upon returning to my room, I came upon Pegasus-san, who was lying facedown on a pillow.

He's probably worn out from all the driving.

While saying ‘Thanks for all the hard work’ in my mind, I decided that it would be best to enter the hot springs while Pegasus-san was sleeping, so I grabbed a yukata and towel from the closet.

“Un...?”

“Geh...”

Although I had tried to make as little sound as possible, unfortunately for me, Pegasus-san had woken up.

Holding a yukata and a towel, our eyes met.

“Hm? Kodaka-kun, you going to take a bath?”

“Ah, well..... yeah.”

“I see, well then I'll come as well. Could you wait a second for me please.”

“.....Y-Yeah...”

.....In the end, it seems I'll be going to the hot spring together with Pegasus-san.

Washing each other's backs, hearing about his life when he was a student, and having to listen to him reminisce about my old man (I've heard this all before) once again...

Incidentally, the spacious public bath seemed to have been reserved for us, and the open air bath's scenery was also wonderful. I would of course love to take it easy here by myself.



Leaving Pegasus-san behind, I quickly got out of the bath, changed into my yukata and dried my hair.

After finishing in the dressing room, I started heading back to my room, but on the way I came across a map of the building. As I was giving it a look over for whatever reason, my eyes stopped on the words 'Ping-Pong Room'.

Hee..... so there's a Ping-Pong Room, huh.

Having some interest in it, I decided to head over there.

In the Ping-Pong Room there were about 10 tables for Ping-Pong, as well as Sena, Yukimura, Maria, and Aoi.

Everyone was in a yukata, and they were all playing Ping-Pong, with Yukimura facing Aoi, and Sena against Maria.

“Ah, Onii-chan!”

The first one to notice me was Maria, who called out to me, and then the other three people stopped playing Ping-Pong and looked in my direction.

“Thank you for all your hard work, Aniki,” said Yukimura.

“Kodaka, you already took a bath?”

I nodded in reply to Sena's question.

“Ah, haven't you guys gone in yet?”

“Yeah. It's something we don't get to do everyday, so we decided to work up a sweat before taking a bath.”

So Sena said, but it seemed like she hadn't broken into a sweat at all.

Aoi, Yukimura, and Maria all had sweat beading down their foreheads though, and their hair and yukatas were in disarray.

“You wanna play too Kodaka? If these girls face me they don’t stand a chance.”

At Sena’s remark, Aoi and Yukimura’s faces showed a hint of anger, and Maria retorted:

“N-No way! This time I’ll beat Sena for sure!”

She flared up.

“I just got out of the bath so I think I’ll pass.”

“I see...”

Disappointment spread across Sena’s face, and she returned to her match with Maria.

By the way, Sena was holding her racquet shakehand, while Maria was using hers in a pen-holder grip.

“Yukkii, let’s do some intensive training!”

“Sounds good.”

Aoi and Yukimura started up their rally again.

Both of them were using their racquets shakehand.

For whatever reason, I ended up watching their games.

I played Ping-Pong in gym a bit while in middle school. Although I wasn’t really good or bad at it, when compared to someone like myself, Maria was considerably skilled.

She was able to react to the fast moving ball, and constantly dart around the table to return the ball with her short reach. The ball was moving so quick that I was having trouble following it with my eyes.

Against those fierce attacks of Maria, Sena seemed bored as she moved as little as possible to return Maria’s volleys. Just what kind of reflexes does she have...

“Fungyaa!”

“Tei!”

“Gyaa. You got me again.”

Easily returning the smash that Maria had sent with all her strength, Sena gained one point.

It seems that body type makes the biggest difference after all..... if Maria used drives as her main stroke it might be different, but it seemed she stood no chance by using straight shots.

And as for Aoi and Yukimura, it seemed both of them were amateurs at Ping-Pong.

Their match was vastly different from Sena and Maria's. I had more than enough time to follow the ball with my eyes in their exchanges.

Their rallies didn't last very long either, with one of them missing early on and ending it.

“Tei!”

“Yaa”

Although both of them were complete beginners, watching them chase after the ball as if their life depended on it was quite pleasant..... however.

In the middle of their game, they hadn't noticed that their yukata belts had loosened, causing a big area to be exposed at the front...!

As a result of all the pointless movements they were making, every time they swung their racquet, glimpses of their chest appeared and disappeared.

Aoi was wearing a sports bra so she was still okay, the problem was with Yukimura.

Yukimura..... wasn't wearing a bra.

“Haa, aha..... nhaa!”



Her cheeks were flushed, and while letting out some strangely alluring pants, Yukimura threw her arm out every once in a while as if her life depended on it.

Every time she moved, her meagre-yet-lovely breasts would jump out in front of my eyes, causing a certain feeling to start to well up inside me all of a sudden.

Forcibly repressing the urge to watch the entire spectacle, I turned around.

“Kodaka-kun, you’re leaving already?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m feeling a bit chilly after taking a bath.”

“Is that so. Then please face me next time, Aniki.”

“Y-You got it! Whenever I’m up for it again!”

As if running away from Yukimura’s sweet voice, I left the Ping-Pong Room behind.

Chapter 13: Complete

I returned to my room, killing time for a couple of hours by playing my portable game and reading light novels, after which I went back to the hot springs for a second bath.

I was planning to take it easy in there, but Pegasus-san ended up coming along with me once more, and to top it off we ended up washing each others backs again for some reason.

I don't know why, but it seemed he loved the act of washing backs. Thanks to that, my back was sparkling clean, probably.

Shortly after my second bath I returned to my room as it was time for dinner, and our hostess brought our meal to the room.

The meal was mountain vegetables and freshwater fish, followed by venison stew.

It had been a while since I had last eaten venison, and it had a unique flavor.

“Yep, deer is pretty tasty after all huh. Once, I was in Hokkaidou with Hayato when...”

Pegasus-san was in a good mood, and started up his reminiscing again.

By the way, he wasn't drinking any alcohol.

If that Pegasus-san, who was incredibly poor with handling his liquor, had fallen asleep it would've given me peace of mind, as I would be able to take a bath by myself. But when I suggested he should have a drink, “Tomorrow I will have to drive us all back. On top of that, getting drunk and taking a bath is dangerous.” Those were the very respectable words he had said.

Although he was a ridiculous old man, it seemed that he could still restrain himself so that something truly fatal didn't happen. I guess that should have been expected.

With that said, after dinner I took another two hour break, until Pegasus-san invited me for a third bath. Of course, we washed each other's backs this time as well.

As usual I left Pegasus-san behind and quickly got out of the bath.

Even though it had been my third time getting in the bath, I felt like I hadn't been able to relax at all.

It's not as if I particularly liked hot springs or anything, but it'd gotten to the point where I wanted to relax in a hot spring by any means possible.

I would have preferred to go when Pegasus-san is sleeping.....but wait, the bath will only be open until midnight. If that's the case then it seems like I'll never get to relax.

“Haa~...”

I heaved a heavy sigh as I walked out of the dressing room, and then my eyes came to a halt over the map of the building once again.

Entry hall, Lobby, Shop, Ping-Pong Room, Large Public Bath [Red Flower Area (Men's Bath)], Large Public Bath [King Flower Area (Women's Bath)], Outdoor Bath [Gold Ring Area (Mixed Bath)].

“.....”

Suddenly, an idea popped up in my head.

Mixed Bathing.

It would be off-limits during the ski training course, but today there didn't seem to be any restrictions.

Excluding us, the only other guests were a few old people.

And as for the girls, it seemed that the women's bath had been reserved for them, so they probably wouldn't go to the mixed bath.

Although the possibility that there will be some old ladies taking a bath wasn't nonexistent.....
Well, even if there are old ladies in the bath, I'll figure something out.

.....*All right.*

My mind made up, I started to move.

No longer heading to my room, I turned around, and with a quick pace I hurried to the outdoor mixed bath.



The Gold Ring Area was a fair distance away from the other two large bath houses, and luckily I was able to make it to the dressing room without being seen by any of the girls.

It's not like I planned on doing anything bad, so even if I had been seen there wouldn't be a problem, but it would be really embarrassing if they found out that I was going to the mixed bath.

Letting out a sigh of relief, I took off my yukata and underwear, and headed towards the outdoor bath with a sense of liberation.

The moment I opened the door and stepped out of the dressing room, the December evening air from the snowy landscape bared its teeth and assaulted my entire body.

Ahhh, as expected, it's cold..... way too cold...!

My body had been washed three times already, so I immediately headed for the center of the bath—— as I was doing so, I heard a voice coming from inside the hot spring.

“...Christ, each and every one of them over there has such a damn lovely face, fuck! I finally thought I'd have an advantage, and suddenly those two giant tit characters appeared out of nowhere! Why did I of all people have to get stuck between those two pieces of rotten meat that have only been living two years longer than me and be forced to have these miserable feelings! Shit, ShitShitShit, those snobs were looking at me with eyes of pity weren't they! Trying to be considerate of me when they don't even understand this miserable feeling, those damn natural normalfags! Shit, why do I of all people have to be in this place alone...! Alone, me of all people, alone?! That's not right! I'm not that miserable of a being! It's not isolation, but rather solitude! Oh I missed you you son of a bitch! I'm a Khan! It's been a while since I've gone into solitude after having my fill of things, fuck!But it really is lonely after all.....I don't like the cold or the loneliness Kodaka..... gusu...”

In the corner of the bath by herself, submerged up to her chin and looking up at the starry sky, while spewing out that abusive language incredibly fast, was:

“.....Uu~~~~, I think I'll return to normal now...”

“.....Rika?”

“KYA?!”

SPLASH

At my timid call to her, Rika let out a shriek and dove underwater.

“Achoo!”

I sneezed. At any rate, it was way too cold, so I quickly got into the hot spring.

Feels good...

The heat from the hot spring spread throughout my body, it felt as if all the tiredness in my body just dissolved away in the water.

“Whew..... I've come back to life.”

“Don't come back to life, idiot!”

With a splash, Rika's head vigorously shot out from under the water to yell at me, and then somewhat embarrassed, she hid her chest and turned her back to me.

Rika didn't even have a towel around her, so she was completely in the nude.

My heart almost jumped out of my chest upon seeing Rika's white back, so I also turned my back to her in a hurry.

I also thought that I should try and create some distance between us, but as the outdoor hot spring was smaller than the other two baths, it seemed like there really wasn't any point.

“W-W-W-W-Why did Kodaka come here?!”

“The board chairman's in the men's bath so I can't relax over there! W-What about you?! Why did you deliberately come to the mixed bath?! ”

Rika started to make a commotion, and I was a little shaken up myself, so I asked her a question in return.

“Uu...” moaned Rika, and then summed it up quickly:

“.....Because it's embarrassing to get in a bath with other people.”

She said something that I didn't really understand.

“Why is it embarrassing to get in a bath with other girls?”

“B-Because! When you get in the bath you have to do it in the nude, don't you?”

“Well yeah, it's a bath.”

“.....There's already the cheat level people from the Neighbors Club, and both Hinata-senpai and Ootomo-senpai from the student council are already beauties, but on top of that even their boobs are big. Jinguuji-senpai is pretty and has good style, and Yusa-senpai is also cute. It's torture for a girl who's not cute to get in the bath with people like that there...”

“Huh?”

Again not understanding what she meant, I raised my eyebrows.

“.....Um, you know. Is it possible this 'girl who's not cute' is..... yourself you're talking about?”

“Well, who else would it be?”

I was amazed at Rika who had become sulky and muttered that.

Really, just what is she saying?

“.....Well, I mean you..... you’re pretty c-cute you know?”

That seemed to have worsened her mood even more, as she retorted:

“.....You’re saying strange things again.”

“No you’re the one who’s saying the strange things..... I mean, how many times have I said it in front of you? That you’re..... cute, and various other things...”

“Did you say that? But you know, that was just frivolous talk to make fun of Rika wasn’t it?”

“.....So that’s what you thought it was?”

Hearing what Rika really thought came as a shock.

A few days after summer vacation had ended, when Rika had removed her glasses and let down her hair, without thinking I had blurted out that she was cute and that she was right in my strike zone.

Without a doubt those had been my true feelings.

On the train when we were going to Nagaya, I had also said ‘Rika’s looks are usually cute’.

I had deliberately said that then to make fun of Rika, but the ‘cute’ part was the truth.

“.....You should know that yourself. There’s no way Rika is something like cute.”

Talking herself down, Rika muttered that somewhat lonesomely.

Those words lit a fire in my heart.

Just why in the world does this person rate her own appearance so low?

“.....You need to stop kidding around.”

Without thinking, I let a small voice slip out.

“Eh?”

“.....When I said that you’re cute, and that you’re right in my strike zone, those things were..... without a doubt, they were my true feelings.”

“Right, right...”

At Rika who seemed lamentable, I got irritated and said:

“Ah jeez, why are you so smart, yet at times a complete idiot?”

“I-Idiot...?!”

Rika was at a loss for words, so I turned to face her and yelled out in desperation:

“YOU ARE CUTE!!”

My face started to feel incredibly hot thanks to the combined effect of the heat from the hot spring and my embarrassment, but nevertheless I continued:

“But I mean, if you’re not cute, then who in this world is?...You are cute. No matter how you look at it you are definitely cute.....and until you believe it, I will keep saying it over and over. Rika is incredibly cute! Rika you’re cute, Rika-chan, you’re seriously an angel, like, you make me breathless, you know?! More than Sena, more than Yozora, more than Yukimura, more than Kate, more than Hinata-san, more than Akane-san, more than Karin-san, more than Aoi-san, you are the cutest out of them all!”

I declared loudly.

Rika had nothing to say.

In exchange, I heard a splash and the sounds of Rika standing up from the bath.

As I felt the ripples on the water subside:

“.....Really?”

Rika’s voice seemed to be entreating me.

“Really.”

“——Then Kodaka, look over here.”

“Ha?! No, I mean you’re over there.”

“It’s fine.”

My thoughts were in disarray, but Rika was talking very calmly.

There was no helping it, so I shut my eyes and turned towards Rika.

“.....Open your eyes.”

After several seconds of hesitation, I timidly opened my eyes.

And there was Rika, completely nude.

“.....That’s a face that’s saying ‘and there was Rika completely nude,’ without any kind thoughts or feelings.”

Her face now bright red with embarrassment, she put on a wry smile and said something similar to what she had said when she’d worn the maid outfit.

“.....Ahh. My minds gone pure white, I can’t think of anything at all.”

As I squeezed those words out of my befuddled mind, Rika said something else like she had before, “Ba-ka Ba-ka, Kodaka no Ba-ka,” but this time the smile she showed was completely different from the one back then.

“.....Am I cute?”

Rika asked me with a fragile voice.

“Y-You’re cute.”

I replied hoarsely.

“.....Want to touch my boobs?”

“I-I don’t particularly want to not touch them!”

Being asked such an outrageous thing, I instinctively tried to deny it, but ended up fumbling with my words.

As she wasn’t using her arms to cover those twin hills of hers, my eyes were drawn in.

Rika shifted her gaze to my lower half, and her face turned scarlet.

“.....Just like Maria-sensei said, it doesn’t really have a kind feeling to it.”

“J-J-J-Just where do you think you’re looking?! Have some shame!”

Panicking, I turned my back to Rika.

From behind me Rika let out a muffled giggle.

And then—— Rika came from behind and put her arms around my neck, embracing me.

And on my back I could feel the sensation of two soft things.



“~~~~~! W-W-W-W-W-W-Wha, you, wha?”

I stammered, surprised and stunned to the point where I couldn't form words. Rika whispered into my ear:

“.....This is thanks for calling me cute.”

Even though I couldn't see her face, I knew that it was just as bright red as mine.

Just as you'd expect, my heart was beating violently like a drum.

“N-No more!”

She said after about five seconds, and she pulled her chest away from my back to separate from me.

.....There's no mistaking it, my heart's never beaten faster in my entire life than during those five seconds.

Rika got out of the bath, and started walking towards the dressing room.

So that I wouldn't look at that figure from behind, I shut my eyes tightly and thrust my head under the water.

I heard the dressing room door open, and then the sound of it being closed. She must have deliberately slammed it shut so that I'd be able to hear it underwater, I thought.

“Puhaaa”

Raising my head from the water, I stared up at the entire starry night sky and took a huge breath, then exhaled.

Over and over again I took a deep breath and exhaled.

It felt like my blood was boiling, and no matter how much of the cool winter air I seemed to breathe in, my body wouldn't cool down at all.

Chapter 14: Mikadzuki Yozora's Family Situation

As my body had finally begun to wrinkle, I hopped out of the outdoor bath and started bobbing down the corridor towards my room.

On my way I stumbled upon Yozora, glued to a sofa in the lobby.

“.....What's the matter?”

As I approached her, I sensed that something was wrong.

Yozora's yukata was messed up and her eyes were cloudy.

“Ahh, is that you, Kodaka...?”

Yozora smiled weakly.

“What's with that Jinguuji woman..... she clings to my body carelessly, tries to rub my chest and even went as far as trying to strip me of my yukata as I rested near the end. Can you believe it...?”

“O-Oh...”

That Karin..... she went after Yozora more aggressively than I expected.

“.....She said that it's all just normal bonding between girls, so I put up with the shame, but I have a feeling that this goes way beyond that...”

“Ah, yeah, that was just Karin tricking you.”

“What...?! S-So it really was like that after all...!”

After hearing about Karin's deception, Yozora began to quiver in anger.

“That bitch..... I don't have any friends so I didn't know how far 'normal' goes..... shit, that pervert..... when I get back to my room, I'm going to tie her up and roll her all over the place...”

I didn't protest, as I felt that such measures might be needed to ensure the safety of Yozora's chastity.

It's just that in that girl's case, it may actually give her pleasure instead.

“.....Ah, by the way, Yozora.”

“Hmm?”

“I hear you’re Hinata-san’s little sister?”

A displeased expression found its way onto Yozora’s face.

“.....How much did you hear from that woman?”

“Only the fact that your parents got divorced while you were young, I guess.”

“I see...”

“Hinata-san wants to get along with you, you know.”

“.....I know. She keeps pestering me, saying ‘let’s get along’ all the time.”

Yozora had a distant look in her eyes.

“Geez, why she has to say something like ‘let’s get along’ in such a straightforward manner..... it honestly makes me wonder if she even *is* my sister.”

There seemed to be a hint of jealousy in her words.

“When it comes to not being able to say things honestly, there isn’t anyone who can come close to you, after all.”

“Muu...”

Yozora puffed up her cheeks in dissatisfaction, unable to object. Instead she just stuttered a bit without actually saying anything.

Perhaps she isn’t honest with her words, but I find this attitude of hers to be very honest.

“.....You could say I take after my mother.”

Said Yozora suddenly.

“The reason my and that woman’s parents got a divorce was because my father cheated on my mother. My mother and I mainly live off the alimony he sends us.”

Now that I think about it, when Yozora and I went to the cinema that one time, she threw her hatred towards the content of the movie and the characters that appeared in it.

The story was about a man and a woman’s love affair, even though they both had their own families.

I wondered if Yozora felt the movie reflected the environment she was living in and was annoyed about being reminded about it.

“My mother is, how do I say this..... ‘one of those types’. A graduate from a first class university but totally useless when it comes to the matters of the house. She whines a lot and her jealousy runs deep..... Perhaps if I said that I would be like her if my personality continued like this into adulthood, you’d understand how bad her case is?”

As I watched Yozora laugh in self torture, I said nothing.

“.....My father still tried to treasure her despite everything..... but it must have been too difficult for him in the end. His heart was taken by a woman who was cheerful, kind, perfect at housework and above all is a good cook. That woman is Hidaka Hinata’s current mother. I only met with her a few times but she was kind to me, too. If one was asked which of the two was more charming, I guess anyone would reply that she was more charming than my mother...”

“.....”

“Incidentally, that woman was apparently my mother’s friend back in college..... having her daughter and husband taken away by her friend, she was...”

Yozora smirked cynically.

“After the divorce there was a time when I tried to lift up her spirits by cooking for her..... she rebuked my effort as being spiteful and stabbed me with the kitchen knife.”

“Wha...?!”

Despite my strong reaction to such a shocking event, Yozora continued indifferently.

“Ever since then, my hands would shake uncontrollably whenever I held a kitchen knife, so I can’t cook..... and there are of course other bad happenings between me and that woman.”

“Why didn’t you go to your father’s place like Hinata-san?”

I asked, even though I was unsure if I should pry into something so personal.

“Who knows? I don’t get it too well myself. Even though it was obvious to me at the time, which one of them would make me happy...”

Yozora let out a sigh.

“Kodaka. I hate women.”

Yozora confessed, as if vomiting the words.

“A person who is cheerful and kind, who is good and loved by everyone, stole her friend’s husband and daughter—— she stole my father and sister. My mother, who is normally quiet and beautiful, would throw all kinds of insults towards them with an almost demonic look on her face. The same mouth that taught me the wonder of friendship was now insulting her former friend with foul language. I became disgusted by the fact that I am a woman. That’s why..... I became Sora. Perhaps if I’d transformed into a man, I would’ve been able to live my life head on like the heroes on TV. But despite all that...

“——Why did things turn out like this?”

On the verge of tears, Yozora repeated what she had said two days ago, and stood up.

I was left speechless as I watched her disappear down the hallway.

It’s been like this a lot these days.

And here I’m supposed to have stopped pretending I was oblivious or that I didn’t hear anything.

But even though I’ve tried to face things head-on, reality carries on however it pleases.

Before long, Yozora’s figure could no longer be seen in the corridor.

At that moment, I noticed someone rising from the shadows of a different sofa than the one Yozora had been lying on.

The figure had impressive long black hair, and was none other than Hinata-san.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

As I interrogated her, a somewhat embarrassed wry smile appeared on her face.

“It seems Yozora noticed me though.”

“.....I see.”

So, Yozora said all of that knowing full well that Hinata-san was listening in. This of course included Yozora’s intention to refuse her.

“So is it impossible to reconcile after all...?”

Hinata-san murmured, with a face that looked like it would be covered in tears any moment now.

This was the first time I'd ever seen her so frail; I didn't know what to say for some time.

Hinata-san then turned her back to me, and started to walk away feebly.

Whether I face her now or later, reality will keep flowing selfishly. And that's precisely why...

—*Facing her alone, won't be enough.....!*

I gripped my resolve as tightly as I could:

“Hinata-san!”

I realized that I had yelled out to Hinata-san.

“Hmm?”

She turned to look at me. I quietly took a deep breath and let it out, and then said:

“Please give me the chance to save Yozora.”

(To be continued.)

Translator notes and references***Chapter 1: The Time When I Held Your Hand***

1. *Kouhai*: Japanese for “junior/underclassmen”.

Chapter 2: Hasegawa Kodaka’s Life Counseling

1. Referring to how Rika used a normal word (she’s not normal).
2. ‘*Human Instrumentality Project*’: [Neon Genesis Evangelion](#) reference.
3. ‘*Tsukkomi*’: Part of a Japanese two people comedy-act. The word “tsukkomi” refers to the role which the second comedian plays by “butting in” and correcting the boke’s (other person) errors. Click [here](#) for more info.
4. ‘*Eighth-Grade Syndrome*’: Kids being in a phase where they think to live in a dark world or similar delusions. Often happening around the 8th grade. Also main-subject of and perhaps reference to ‘[Chuunibyou demo Koi ga Shitai!](#)’.

Chapter 3: The Neighbors Club’s Unfortunate ★★☆☆ Star System

1. ‘*Pocky*’: Japanese snack. See [this](#) picture.
2. ‘*Dogeza*’: Lit: “Sitting right on the ground”. Japanese way of showing deep apology or to request a favor from someone by kneeling down and bowing in a way that one’s forehead touches the floor.
3. ‘*Three Star Satisfaction Rating*’: Referring to Michelin Stars. A three star rating system for restaurants across the world. See [here](#) for more information.

Chapter 5: Bento

1. ‘*LB*’: Lunchbreak.
2. ‘*Rikatory*’: It says “Rika Shitsu”, which can mean either “Rika’s room” or “science room”. It’s a pun, so Rika + laboratory = rikatory. Deal with it.
3. ‘*Calorie Friend*’: Play on the Japanese nutrition supplements brand “Calorie Mate”. See [here](#).
4. Cthulhu reference, even though the actual story references an ancient Semitic god. More information [here](#).
5. Probably some kind of blushing. She’s really strange.
6. ‘*Mentaiko*’: Marinated roe of pollock. More information [here](#).

Chapter 6: Perch

1. Classrooms in Japan are usually organized by “year – class”, so she is a second-year of class four.
2. Pouting.

Chapter 7: Nickname

1. To be fair, he laughs “Byuhihi...”, but c’mon.

Chapter 9: The Honor of the Dejected Loser

1. Those red sausages that are cut into octopus shapes.

Chapter 10: The Neighbors Club’s Saga

1. ‘Warasubo’: The stuff that nightmares are made of. See [here](#).